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H.M.S. "ANONYMOUS"

By the Same Author :

PINCHER MARTIN, O.D.

A LITTLE SHIP.

THE SUB.

CARRY ON !

STAND BY !

OFF SHORE.

THE WATCH BELOW.

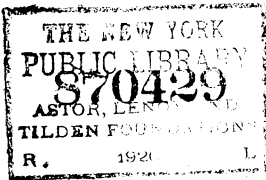
MINOR OPERATIONS.

SEA, SPRAY, AND SPINDRIFT,

H.M.S. ANONYMOUS

BY
TAFFRAIL

HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
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TO
MY SHIPMATES AND FLOTILLA-MATES
IN THE TENTH, THIRTEENTH AND
TWENTIETH DESTROYER FLOTILLAS.

1914—1918.

*Printed in Great Britain by Love & Malcomson, Ltd.,
London and Redhill.*

PREFACE.

THIS book is an attempt to describe the ups and downs, the comings and goings, of the two destroyers and the three different flotillas in which I have had the honour of serving during the war.

It was not our happy fortune to take part in those great adventures in the Dardanelles, at Jutland, at Zeebrugge, and elsewhere, adventures which will pass down to posterity in the pages of history. The incidents described herein, true though they are, may seem trivial and commonplace, but they were none the less exciting and important enough to those who took part in them.

And lest I be accused of exaggeration, let me tell the verdict passed upon one of my earlier books, a copy of which was presented by some misguided person to the library of a bluejackets' club.

A seaman picked up the volume and started to turn over the pages, only to fling it aside after a brief inspection.

"Huh!" he exclaimed with a snort of disgust. "I can't stand this. Its just what happens every day on board the ship!"

It was the greatest compliment which has ever been paid to any literary effort of mine, and this book also is merely "what happens

every day" at sea, or used to between 1914 and 1918.

Even now few people realise what actually did take place at sea, though when it is said that no less than 2,154 encounters with enemy submarines were reported during six months of 1918, the immensity and exceptional nature of the conflict may partly be understood.

Moreover, our naval losses during the fifty-one months of war, by gunfire, submarine, mine, collision, and the ordinary perils of navigation, amounted to 13 battleships, 3 battle-cruisers, 14 cruisers, 13 light cruisers, 66 flotilla leaders and destroyers, 55 submarines, 2 minelayers, 44 monitors, torpedo-gunboats, sloops, gunboats, torpedo-boats, and patrol boats, 5 air-craft carriers and mine-sweepers, 17 armed merchant cruisers, and 13 armed boarding steamers—a total of 245 commissioned men-of-war. In addition to these there were lost some 440 trawlers, drifters, paddle minesweepers, yachts, whalers, motor launches, and motor boats of the auxiliary patrol or mine-sweeping services.

These figures alone will give some idea of the conditions which prevailed, and the wholly unprecedented nature of the war through which we have emerged victorious.

Abler pens than mine have already sung the praises of the British bluejacket—to use the term in its generic sense. If this volume adds one iota to the feelings of respect and admiration with which the public should regard the men on the lower decks of His Majesty's ships, I shall be content.

PREFACE

vii

For my own part I have known these men for something over twenty years, more than four of which have been spent in war. And now, more than ever, I realise how immeasurably we stand in their debt, and how great an honour and a privilege it is to have served with them as one of their happy brotherhood during the past few years of stress and anxiety, to final triumph.

“TAFFRAIL.”

1919.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. THE FIRST COMMAND	II
II. COMMISSIONED	30
III. A MISHAP IN THE BIGHT	55
IV. A MERE SPASM	71
V. THE MOTHER SHIP	96
VI. THE TONDERN AIR RAID, 1916 ..	109
VII. THE BEEF TRIP	135
VIII. DOVER AND THE BELGIAN COAST ..	155
IX. HEAVY METAL,	173
X. A NEW SHIP	191
XI. ROSYTH AND THE "B.C.F." ..	204
XII. A WINTER JOURNEY.. ..	224
XIII. THE JOURNEY RESUMED	239
XIV. THE BLUEJACKET	258
XV. THE WATCH DOGS	278
XVI. THE "MOB"	293
XVII. "SIC TRANSIT....."	316

H.M.S. "ANONYMOUS"

CHAPTER I

THE FIRST COMMAND

I

EARLY in the morning of May 31st, 1918, H.M.S. "Fairy"—Lieutenant G. H. Barnish, R.N.R.—was escorting a convoy of merchant vessels in the vicinity of Flamborough Head. At five minutes past two the commanding officer, who happened to be on deck in the after part of his ship, heard a noise in the darkness which he took to be the thud of a torpedo explosion. He at once ran forward to the bridge, increased to full speed, and headed his ship in the direction of the sound.

A few moments later a submarine was sighted on the surface, one point on the starboard bow, at a distance of about three hundred yards. The "Fairy" at once flashed a challenge to establish the stranger's identity, but no reply was forthcoming, and, satisfied that she was hostile, headed straight for the submarine and succeeded in ramming her in the stern.

The submarine, whose gun was manned, fired a single round, to which the "Fairy" replied with a rapid burst of fire from her after six-pounder, obtaining several direct hits. Then, circling round, she again rammed her adversary, striking her close beside the gun.

By this time most of the submarine's crew, realising that their vessel was doomed, had taken to the water, and within two minutes of receiving the second blow, she sank. Five survivors were picked up by the "Fairy," and others by a trawler.

The damage sustained by the "Fairy" was so serious that, in spite of all efforts made to save the ship by steaming stern first towards the shore, with the intention of beaching her, she sank at 2.57 a.m. There were no casualties.

This, besides the fact that the submarine had previously been in collision with one of the merchant ships of the convoy, thus accounting for the thud heard by the "Fairy's" captain, is all the information to be gleaned from the terse official account of the incident. We know nothing whatever of the feelings of the officers and men of the "Fairy" when they felt the bows of their small ship crashing into their enemy, nor the sensations of the Germans when they saw the doughty little craft returning to the attack. For them it must have been a terrifying moment—they leapt overboard.

The "Fairy" was an aged war-horse, a destroyer completed for sea so long ago as 1896. She was one of the "thirty-knotter" type, a little vessel of some 370 tons displace-

ment, long past the heyday of her youth. Your modern destroyer is three or four times this size, is far more powerfully armed, and an infinitely better seaboat. But many officers who have commanded the newer destroyers during the war served their apprenticeship in the "thirty-knotters" in the palmy days of peace, and most of us regard them with some affection.

The "Fairy," moreover, was the second vessel I ever had the honour to be in command of as a young and rather irresponsible lieutenant. I remember the Pentland Firth patrol during the manœuvres of '09, and particularly one early morning, when the fog was so thick that the visibility was little more than 100 yards. We were creeping along at 12 knots, trying to make our anchorage in Thurso Bay. We were yelping dismally on our syrens, as we followed our next ahead, when suddenly the mournful sound re-echoed through the fog.

"High land somewhere close!" muttered the gunner, peering through the murk.

High land it was; for a moment later, as our leader's syren sounded again, the air became full of the discordant screeching of terrified seabirds.

Looking over the bows, I suddenly saw a great wall of cliff, blurred and ghostly, standing up out of the sea, and towering far above our heads, until its summit was lost in the mist. I could see a line of confused foam at its base, could hear the thundering roar of the breaking swell, while out of the corner of my eye I glimpsed a smooth, water-worn rock festooned in masses of trailing seaweed barely

eighty yards off on our port bow. It was Dunnet Head.

"Christians awake!" said the gunner, who always quoted the Prayer Book or the Scriptures in times of poignant mental anxiety.

And in that moment many thoughts flashed through my mind. I saw my destroyer days numbered, and myself condemned to everlasting reproach for having "piled up" one of His Majesty's ships.

But I could not think for very long. Something had to be done, and done very quickly. I dashed at one engine-room telegraph—the gunner dashed at the other, and together we jammed them both over to "full astern." Our syren shrieked madly three times.

The "Fairy," handy little ship that she was, responded nobly. She seemed to sense that something was wrong, and stopped short in her stride. We could feel her dragging reluctantly through the water as the engines stopped, and hardly had the sound of our syren died away, than there came a jerk, and the twin propellers kicked and started madly to thrash the water as they drove astern. In a few seconds, which seemed an eternity, we had gathered sternway, and were moving backwards through the water. We had escaped.

What happened to our leader I never quite discovered. She got clear somehow, but the "Fairy" saved my skin that day.

At the time we talked of the incident with rather bated breath, considering ourselves lucky to have escaped wet shirts, a lost, or seriously damaged, ship, and an indelible

red mark in the Black Book at the Admiralty. To-day, after four years of war, the incident is just a memory. Our point of view has changed.

And nine years later, as the result of her collision with the submarine, the "Fairy" found herself with crumpled bows and a badly damaged bottom. Notwithstanding, she turned and dealt her enemy another blow, and the submarine sank as a result of it. But the second impact accentuated the "Fairy's" injuries, so that she began to founder.

We know little of her captain's efforts to save his ship, or of how, with the bows of his vessel open to the sea, he tried to steam her, stern first, towards the shore, with the intention of beaching her. We know that she was sinking fast, and that presently her screws and rudder were out of water and useless, and that then, and not until then, he was forced to give up the struggle as hopeless. There was nothing else for it. She had to be abandoned, and soon after the men and officers had left her she disappeared for ever.

But I am glad the "Fairy" died an honourable death instead of ending her days ignominiously amidst the clamour and dirt of a ship-breaker's yard.

I am glad she sank alongside her enemy, for once I served in her.

2

Before the war the majority of young lieutenants starting their careers in command of destroyers began at the very lowest rung of

the ladder by being appointed to old "27 knotters" with reduced complements in one of the flotillas stationed at Portsmouth, Devonport, or Chatham. Here it was that most of us learned something of the art of handling torpedo craft by bitter personal experience in the shape of occasional collisions, altercations with jetties or dockyard walls, or narrow escapes of the same. We also discovered what it felt like to be solely responsible for the navigation of our own small ships, and what to do and what not to do in various of the nautical circumstances to be met with round about the British Isles.

The idea, of course, was that the results of our inexperience should be wreaked on vessels of little value. Some of us, the unlucky ones, perpetrating more than our fair share of "bumps" and consequent disbursement of public money on repairs, fell by the wayside and left the destroyer service for good and all as too expensive. Those who survived the ordeal of apprenticeship gradually attained to larger and more modern craft.

One is forced to admit that the policy of sending us at first to old vessels was a very sound one. We were very young and immensely proud of our first commands, but there is no getting away from the fact that many of us were also very foolish. Not a few of the "27 knotters" achieved crumpled bows through charging stone walls, or damaged propellers through taking short cuts over rocky ledges, where even angels would fear to tread.

There was once a destroyer named after a

bird—wild monkeys will not force me to divulge her name, nor that of her commanding officer—who, when brand new from her builders, was taken at low water over a short cut into Plymouth Sound. The skipper forgot, for the time being, that he was in command of a ship drawing eight feet of water, and when the inevitable crash came, he left his two screw propellers and his rudder on the rocks behind him. The mangled remains were presently taken in tow by a dockyard tug and conducted mournfully up the river, but the skipper himself was wholly unperturbed.

“Submit,” was the signal he semaphored to the Commander-in-Chief on the way. “Have had the misfortune to lose my tail feathers on the Mewstone Ledge!”

History does not relate the remarks of the Admiral on receiving this rather naive communication, but I believe that the officer who made it is now a very shining light in the service.

There was also the destroyer who ran amok in her flotilla during steam tactics.

“What ARE you doing?” demanded the senior officer, exasperated beyond measure.

“Submitted—Twenty-five knots!” went back the rather startling answer.

One hears, too, of a destroyer who, during a practice night attack on Portsmouth Harbour many years ago, mistook the entrance and ran full tilt up the sloping sea-wall at Haslar, to knock a man off a bicycle with her bows. Also of the “30 knotter” doing a steam trial in the Solent, who leapt clean over a deeply laden coal barge without damage to herself,

B

but to the considerable detriment of the coal barge, which sank incontinently. One remembers these yarns, and most of them are founded on fact, though they have lost nothing in the telling among a never ending succession of destroyer officers.

But the *creme de la creme* of all the torpedo craft chestnuts is the yarn of a certain young officer who was once appointed to the command of an ancient torpedo-boat for the annual summer manœuvres. He started off from Chatham on a bright summer morning with six dozen bottled beer and a portable harmonium with which to while away his leisure moments. He had orders to proceed to Holyhead, but was next heard of at Portsmouth, whither he had gone to demand a new kettle from the dockyard and to lay in a stock of food. After sailing again the same evening he was completely lost sight of.

The Admiralty was in a ferment. Telegrams—it was before the days of universal wireless—flashed to and fro, and flotillas scoured the sea for traces of wreckage.

"Has anybody seen Torpedo Boat Number 000?"

Nobody had, and after three or four days we were all forced to the conclusion that T.B. No. 000 and her company had come to an untimely end.

But she turned up again; for one morning, when the manœuvres were already in full swing, she was discovered off Milford Haven ambling leisurely northward towards her destination. A destroyer was sent off in chase,

and the truant was brought into harbour to give an account of herself.

"Had he met with some accident?" the skipper was asked.

Accident! Certainly not! He'd had a perfectly splendid time.

What had he been doing? What had delayed him?

Doing? Nothing particular. He'd run into some rather nasty weather off the Land's End and didn't like it at all. Thought the ship was going to sink, in fact, so got the harmonium on deck, mustered the ship's company, and sang "Eternal Father Strong to Save." Didn't seem to have much effect on the sea, somehow, so he'd turned tail and run for shelter, and anchored in a bay off a well-known watering place in Cornwall. Had a perfectly splendid time there, for his torpedo-boat was the first real man-o'-war the inhabitants had ever seen. The Mayor and Corporation put up a dinner for himself and his men. The visitors in the hotel put up a dance, and he'd had three days of jolly good golf. Altogether they'd had the time of their lives, and the Navy was quite popular in that place by the time he left. Why hadn't he come on when the weather improved?

Couldn't really say, except that he didn't think that one torpedo-boat more or less made much difference.

Was he a rogue or merely a sanguinary fool? Did he realise that people had given him up as lost? Why on earth hadn't he telegraphed his arrival to the Admiralty?

Given him up as lost ? What a nonsensical notion ! As for telegraphing to the Admiralty, it positively hadn't occurred to him. Yes, he was sorry if he'd done wrong, but he really couldn't understand why people should be so anxious.

The upshot of the business was that that particular torpedo-boat was no longer allowed out alone. What happened to her skipper I do not know.

I still shudder when I remember an incident which took place when I was very young and very innocent. We, in one of the most elderly destroyers then in existence—the fourth destroyer ever built, if I remember rightly—had been detailed to act as tender to a cruiser carrying out target practice off Selsea Bill. The firing was everything that firing should be, and at the close of the first day's practice, late in the evening, we were ordered to close the shore, to anchor for the night, and to be on the firing ground early the following day. We anchored without incident, went below to our evening meal, and turned in.

Towards three o'clock the next morning, when the dawn was breaking, I was aroused from my slumber by a rather agitated able seaman doing duty as quartermaster.

" Please, sir," he stuttered, shaking me by the shoulder. " Please, sir, the ship's high and dry, an' there are rocks stickin' up out o' th' water all round us ! "

The information was alarming, to say the least of it. I " stood not upon the order of my going." I scrambled hurriedly on deck in my pyjamas.

It was even as he had said. There were rocks showing out of the sea all round us, great buttresses and fangs of rock, fringed with streamers of floating kelp. We were literally hemmed in on all sides. We had apparently anchored on a ledge overnight, and with the falling tide and the calm summer night, the ship had subsided gently on the bottom, with never a jar or a tremor to wake us up.

A destroyer, with her frail hull, her great length compared with her beam, and her rudder and screws drawing more water than any other portion of the ship, is not at her best when high and dry on a rocky ledge. She may puncture her bottom, break her back, or bring her weight to bear on her rudder and propellers, thereby damaging the first and bending the screw-shafts so that they cannot revolve.

Indeed, I felt physically ill, and went hot and cold in turns. I cursed myself not only for a fool, but a fool, for getting myself into such a hopeless predicament. I saw my destroyer days numbered just as they were beginning, and myself consigned to everlasting obloquy as a horrible example of what a destroyer officer should not be. It was a most unpleasant sensation.

We lowered the dinghy and I went on a cruise of exploration round the ship. She had a slight list, and the water was lapping her sides well below its usual level. She was ashore, so thoroughly ashore, indeed, that in places one might have got out and walked. And all round her those horrible jagged rocks showed above the water. I poled the boat

round with fear and trepidation in my heart, half expecting to see one of the murderous fangs sticking through the thin bottom. But the ship, with more sense than her skipper, had placed herself neatly in the only safe bed for hundreds of yards. She was supported uniformly throughout her length, as if she had been placed on the blocks in a dry-dock. Not a plate had been bent or a rivet started. The hull was perfectly tight, while the rudder and screws, the most vital portion of her anatomy, were in a natural deep pocket aft.

I breathed again. The tide had started to rise.

We laid our anchors to keep her in position as she became waterborne. We placed a few planks here and there where there were rocks in close proximity to the hull, and, having done this, we could only wait for the tide to do the rest.

It was a calm summer morning, with hardly a breath of wind or a ripple on the water. Had there been a breeze and a nasty little lop, as there very frequently was, the ship would have smashed herself to pieces the moment she floated. But fortune favoured us, and an hour or two later she gave a little wriggle, as the water lifted her and she floated on an even keel. We were taking no further risks, however, but waited until the tide was at its highest before attempting to move. We waited until there was the maximum amount of water over those rocks, and then, weighing our various anchors, backed cautiously seaward under steam.

Beyond a chip in one of the propellers the ship was entirely undamaged. The incident was duly reported, and for some weeks I lived

in trepidation for a summons to attend a court of enquiry. I am waiting still.

That first "27 knotter" was a puny, undersized rat of a thing compared with the huge destroyers of the present day. Her bridge was very cramped, and the cover of the bow torpedo-tube,—the only one we possessed—brought showers of spray hurtling over our heads and into our faces, as she plunged into anything of a head sea. Her accommodation, too, was none of the best, and how some fifteen seamen and about the same number of stokers managed to eat, sleep, and have their being on the tiny mess-decks forward was a mystery I never fathomed. We were little better off aft. There was no cabin for the commanding officer, and the wardroom, a tiny apartment where there was just sufficient room to squeeze past the small table on which we ate, had no better sleeping berths than narrow lockers provided with the hardest of hard cushions. I came to know those cushions very well. I slept on them for many months and was none the worse for it.

Besides the chief artificer engineer, who was a married man and lived ashore when the ship was in harbour, I was the only permanent officer on board. We were generally lent a gunner when we went to sea, but for the whole of one winter, except for occasional trips, I lived on board practically alone. I had not taken to writing in those days, but somehow the time did not seem to hang very heavily on my hands. I polished the mahogany wood-work and table, I scrubbed and polished

the corticene covered deck, I polished every inch of brasswork I could find in our small abode, and when I had finished that I varied the monotony by renovating the paint-work with white enamel filched from the dockyard. I also amused myself by cooking my own meals on a chafing dish when the steward, a dissolute ruffian, so far forgot himself as to remain ashore without leave.

That old ship was certainly not beautiful to gaze upon. She was downright hideous, in fact, for she had four thin, ungainly funnels unequally spaced, with a mast between the first and second. She had a peculiar cut away stern which did not enhance her appearance and occasioned a certain amount of ribald merriment in the flotilla to which she belonged. She was a regular beast at sea. Her boilers had seen their best days, and sometimes, when strange clanking noises, muffled blasphemy, and clouds of steam ascended from the engine room, and the engineer officer disappeared below like a startled rabbit, we imagined that the propelling machinery was on the verge of vanishing through the bottom. On deck, in respect for her great age, we had our motto "Dum Spiro Spero" in golden letters. "Old Dum," the men called it. She may have been old and ugly, the veriest creak in existence, but to me in my youth and innocence she was quite the most wonderful craft in the whole of the British Navy. It is hardly to be wondered at—she was my first command.

3

I remember many incidents of those early destroyer days, and during the subsequent period when I served in a "30 knotter." She belonged at first to a "running flotilla" attached to the Home Fleet, and then, when the newer craft came along, was relegated to a nucleus crew flotilla at one of the home ports.

I recollect a fierce battle which took place during some summer manœuvres, when four of us were ordered in to raid the destroyer patrols off the hostile base. We raided them with some success, though, if it had been the real thing, we must certainly have been sent to the bottom. We met no less than twelve enemy destroyers, and in the fierce hurly-burly with blank ammunition which ensued, we, off our own bat, claimed to have sunk no less than four of our foemen—one by gunfire, one by ramming, and two with our torpedoes!

But the umpires, naturally enough, did not see eye to eye with us in the business. On the contrary, they gave a decision to the effect that we four were all "sunk," and that one of the "enemy" had shared the same fate while another was "seriously damaged." So, with the red and yellow "out of action" flag at the masthead, we steamed back to our base, sadder but wiser men.

I remember an officer they once sent us who had never been in a destroyer before. He was quite a good officer, but could not read a chart.

One night, proceeding by ourselves up the Irish Sea, in beautiful weather and with the shore lights blazing all round, I fixed the ship

and plotted the position on the chart. Then, as we were well out in the open and were to be on the same course for the next three hours, I left the officer of the watch in charge and retired for a little sleep to a deck-chair underneath the bridge. I had given orders to be called in the event of any steamers being sighted, or in any emergency.

I had scarcely dozed off, however, when there came a tug at my shoulder and a hoarse whisper in my ear.

"Please, sir, Mister Jorrocks wants to know if he is to go over the spit?"

"Spit!" I exclaimed, jumping up and rubbing the sleep from my eyes. "What on earth does he mean?"

"Dunno, sir. He said spit right enough."

Evidently I had made a serious miscalculation as to our position, or else Mr. Jorrocks, contrary to orders, had altered course towards the shore and had got himself into difficulties. Anyhow things seemed to be serious, so I clambered up on the bridge with all haste.

But nothing seemed to be wrong, for after hasty glances at the compass, chart, and shore lights, I was satisfied that everything was as it should be, so questioned the officer of the watch.

"What's this about a spit, Mr. Jorrocks?"

"I'm referring to this, sir," he answered, putting his finger on the chart. "Didn't like going over it without letting you know."

"This" was a tongue-shaped projection of the twenty-fathom line on the chart, marked over which we should presently be passing.

Now we drew a matter of eight feet of water or so, and twenty fathoms represents a depth of one hundred and twenty.

Mr. Jorrocks imagined it to be dry land!

I kept the remainder of the watch myself, and Mr. Jorrocks, who, as I afterwards discovered, had been appointed to us by an oversight, reverted to his previous and more congenial occupation in a big ship.

We had many adventures in one way and another, but no adventure of mine ever quite came up to that of a certain destroyer which shall be nameless.

"We ran into a thick fog off the Lizard," her commanding officer told us, "and as I'd lost touch with the rest of the flotilla, I presently eased to dead slow and kept the lead going. Before long the leadsman sang out 'By the mark three!' 'Lord!' said I, looking at the chart. 'We should be in fifteen fathoms!' 'And a half two!' the leadsman shouted again. The water was shoaling fast, so I stopped engines and gave orders to stand by to anchor. 'Where the deuce can we be?' I asked the gunner, for by that time I'd tumbled to it that our compass must be hopelessly out. 'Better send the boat ashore to find out, sir,' he suggested. I thought he was pulling my leg, the old devil, but he wasn't.

"Then, all of a sudden, we heard a peculiar clickety-clang and a sort of regular puffing noise coming out of the fog. 'What the hades is that?' I asked. 'It's not a fog signal, or anything of that kind!' 'Perhaps it's one o' them patent sounding buoys got

out of order and trying to whistle, sir,' said the gunner. 'Buoy be damned!' said I. 'Who ever heard a buoy making a row like that?' We scratched our heads a bit and wondered, and then, as luck would have it, the fog lifted a little, and about a cable dead ahead we saw a sandy beach fringed with rocks. Beyond that, in a meadow, was one of those hay-making machines driven by an engine digging out for daylight. We'd run into a sort of cove, you see, and if we'd gone much further we'd have knocked the funnel off the blooming engine. 'Lord preserve us!' murmured the gunner. 'Full speed astern!' said I. 'This is no place for us!' And it was a pretty near shave, I can tell you!"

It evidently was, but such adventures have never come my way.

One of the best known characters in the modern destroyer navy was a certain officer in charge of a division in the Harwich Flotilla who invariably referred to himself as "father."

If his division was suddenly ordered to sea he rarely made the stereotyped signals, but merely "Follow father," and his children, the other three destroyers of his division, followed.

Sometimes, as destroyers occasionally do, the division lost itself after thirty-six hours of turning and twisting in foggy weather at sea, and "Father" usually asked his offspring for their estimated positions to compare them with his own.

"Sorry, I don't know," was the reply he received on one occasion. "We haven't been steering the same course for twenty consecu-

tive minutes, and my compass is all anyhow."

"Damn your compass!" was the unexpected answer received by semaphore. "How the deuce do you expect father to take you home if you don't know where you are?"

"Father," of course, was in a similar predicament, though he would not admit it. However, he was never at a loss. He would have brought his division safely home from the Heligoland Bight with no better navigational aids than a watch-chain compass, a penny ruler, and a bicycling map of the British Isles. If at a loss for more accurate methods he navigated by sheer instinct, and was never known to fail.

It was this same officer who in the heat of action, when heavy shell were falling all round his ship and fragments were whistling through the air, hit upon a suitable expedient for heartening his men, some of whom were beginning to feel a little nervous.

He knew that the best way of doing it was to appeal to their sense of humour, so clapped the brass binnacle cover on his head as an improvised and very inadequate shrapnel helmet.

"Its all right, my boys!" he shouted, leaning over the bridge so that his extraordinary headgear could be seen. "Cheer up, lads. Don't get the staggers. Father's quite safe."

The result was a roar of laughter, and fear, if it ever existed, was forgotten.

CHAPTER II

COMMISSIONED

I

IT was a bleak and blustery day in October, 1914, when I first saw her lying along the jetty in a Tyne shipbuilding yard. She was still in an unfinished state and workmen swarmed on board her. Her decks were indescribably filthy; her living spaces were littered with orange-peel, bits of newspaper, cigarette ends, and the other accumulated litter of weeks, while the paint-work throughout her was sadly in need of renewal. She looked more like an old ship fit for the scrap-heap than a brand-new destroyer of the very latest type.

I surveyed her rather mournfully, for proud as I was of being appointed to one of the "M Class," vessels with a reputed speed of 34 knots, I could not help wondering how long it would take us to get her anything like clean.

The engineer-lieutenant and a small nucleus of engine-room artificers and ratings had been on the scene for some months supervising the erection and testing of the boilers, turbines, and auxiliary machinery for which they would

be responsible when the ship commissioned. They had likewise accumulated a whole warehouse full of naval stores which had arrived by rail from all parts of the United Kingdom, and how this enormous mountain of gear, ranging from crockery to copper wire, broom-heads to bolts of canvas, saucepans to sealing-wax, rope to rabbit (tinned), and hacksaws to helmets, smoke, Mark II., enclosed in barrels, drums, crates, and packing-cases of every size and weight, could ever be crammed on board the small vessel without bursting her seams, was a problem whose difficulties I dared not pry into.

The engineer officer, who was responsible for the collection, assured me that it would be "all right." I was quite prepared to take his word for it.

The gunner (T)*, who had also joined some weeks previously, had filled another storehouse with shell, cartridges, war-heads for the torpedoes, small arm ammunition, rifles, bayonets, and cutlasses, not to speak of the torpedoes themselves and the hundred and one items necessary for their upkeep. Our ship, indeed, seemed to be in a fair way to becoming an Army and Navy Stores and Messrs. Selfridge rolled into one, while every day fresh consignments of goods provided for our use by a beneficent Admiralty arrived by rail, to be added to the already heterogenous collection. We were certainly well provided for, but I was glad not to be responsible for the work of stowing it all on board.

* (T) That is, for torpedo duties.

About a week subsequent to my appearance came the first lieutenant, and after procuring a nominal list of our crew from the depot at Portsmouth from which we were to be manned, he set to work to make out his watch and station bills. It was a tolerably easy task with a ship's company of between only eighty and ninety, and our troubles did not really begin until, a few days before the ship was ready to undergo her preliminary trials at sea, the men themselves appeared.

It was early in the war, before the days of really efficient billeting and feeding arrangements for the crews of ships about to be commissioned at the out-ports. Having been warned by telegram that the rest of our men would arrive at such and such a time on a certain date, we naturally believed it, and set about finding the necessary lodgings and arranging for food, until such time as the ship was commissioned and they could take up their quarters on board.

But alas for our trouble. That telegram was a fraud, a delusion, and a snare, for the men actually arrived at a totally different hour, a day too early. How the mistake arose I do not pretend to know, but the first notice I had of their advent was a telephone message from the local station-master at 10.30 one morning, to say that some seventy lusty blue-jackets had left a mountain of bags and hammocks on the station platform, together with a pet dog, and that even now they were on their way down to the ship.

"Have they had breakfast?" I asked.

The station-master, judging from their remarks, thought not.

I looked at the first lieutenant, and he looked at me. I heard him muttering softly under his breath. We had not known each other for very long. He was too polite to say it aloud.

"What's to be done?" he eventually asked, with a sigh.

"Feed 'em," said I.

"Where?" he demanded.

"Lord knows," said I. "What about trying the Y.M.C.A.?"

"And who's to pay for the entertainment?" he wanted to know. "You can't give seventy hungry matloes a decent breakfast for nothing!"

"Tell the Y.M.C.A. to send the bill in to the Admiralty."

"They want spot cash," he retorted.

"We must manage somehow," I said firmly.

"I should like to poison the blighter who sent 'em a day too early!" muttered Number One, grinding his teeth.

We fixed things up somehow, and the men, replete and happy, once more, scattered to find their various billets, while a party went to the railway station with a motor-lorry, to bring down their bags and hammocks.

The ship's company were a likely-looking lot, and both the first lieutenant and myself, who were standing on the jetty abreast the ship when they marched down in charge of a petty officer, were pleased with the fine material the authorities had seen fit to send us. The men, for their part, glanced curiously at us

as if to size us up. They were wondering, no doubt, what we should be like to serve with at close quarters, and whether the ship would be a happy one. For the vessel herself, judging from remarks I overheard, they had nothing but praise.

We started by enquiring whether anybody had complaints to make about the accommodation in his billet, whereupon one man stepped forward, amid titters, to inform me that the bed allotted to him had evidently been slept in by a coal-heaver who had not troubled to remove his outer garments. The bed, too, was otherwise inhabited. I informed him that the necessary steps would be taken, and subsequently rectified the matter by removing the complainant to another lodging, much to the disgust of the original landlady, who informed us that she didn't know bluejackets were "so squeamish about little things like them." A personal inspection, however, satisfied us that her mode of life was more economical than hygienic.

The commissioning itself, before we went to sea for trials, was trying, for the men had to take up their residence on board while the ship was still swarming with workmen. It was always raining, and the floors of the living spaces and upper deck were coated with black ooze carried on board by many feet. Painters were slapping black paint* on the hull and upperworks, and white paint down below as

* It should be noted that, for the sake of invisibility at night, destroyers were still painted dull black throughout the earlier part of the war. It was not until after Jutland, during which black was found to make destroyers unduly conspicuous, that this colour was finally altered to grey.

if their lives depended upon it. Carpenters were putting up woodwork on the mess-deck. Electricians were busy tracing faults in the circuits and testing leads all over the ship, while the wardroom and cabins were invaded by an army of cabinet makers, upholsterers, and polishers giving the final touches to the furniture and fittings. The anthracite stoves in the wardroom and my cabin both refused to function, and merely filled the compartments with clouds of acrid smoke when they were kindled. We soon discovered the reason, for the steward had omitted to place the wardroom stove funnel, while some good-natured gentleman had deftly inserted a plug of cotton-waste half-way down mine.

The engine and boiler room were likewise full of contractor's men working against time to get the ship ready. Portable forges for heating rivets were still blazing vigorously on the upper deck and vomiting forth clouds of black smoke, while the clang of hammers and deafening clatter of pneumatic rivetters made day and night hideous.

And in the midst of all this confusion we had to install our ship's company of five and eighty odd souls, they, with all their impedimenta, their yellow-painted canvas kit-bags, their ditty boxes*, their musical instruments,

* The ditty box is a small scrubbed wooden box, some 12 inches by 8 by 8, in which the bluejacket keeps his cherished belongings, such as letters, photographs, and personal relics. The ditty box is provided with a lock and key, but it is an unwritten law that it shall never be locked to show that a man trusts his messmates. As regards money, the sailor generally keeps it in a belt round his middle, and is careful to stow it under the pillow of his hammock at night.

and Jumbo, the pet dog, a strange rotund little beast with a voracious appetite, absurdly thin legs, and a tight black body. Life for the first day was hardly worth living, for we had to embark and unpack a proportion of the stores and ammunition, serve out mess-traps, and unpack charts, navigational books, and instruments. The upper deck was littered with packing cases and the living spaces with straw, shavings, and the men's belongings. There was hardly room to stand anywhere, let alone to sleep, eat, or think.

But life was not without its humour. First I was approached by a workman, who demanded that "that savage beast," indicating Jumbo, who had taken up a commanding position on the gangway and was yapping loudly at everyone who came aboard, should be removed to a place of safety. Now Jumbo, though noisy, would not have harmed a tame rabbit. His height was perhaps twelve inches and his length overall eighteen, but as his overtures were apparently terrifying the nervous workman, we had to confine him. We incarcerated him in an empty meat-safe. He just fitted nicely. His howls of dismay added to the din.

Then the cook could neither get water for his coppers nor persuade the galley fire to burn. We showed him what taps to turn and told him to turn the top of his funnel to the wind.

Next appeared the wardroom steward, suffering from a contused eye and a broken nose. He was followed by an able seaman and accompanied by the coxswain.

"I bring these men before you, sir," said the latter, halting his contingent. "I found them fighting on the mess-deck."

"What is the meaning of this!" I asked the steward.

"Well, sir. I went to my locker on the mess-deck and found it full of this man's clothes," indicating the seaman. "As I was his superior officer I ordered him to remove them."

"Ordered him?" I interrupted.

"Yes, sir, I rank with a second-class petty officer, and consider myself entitled to give second-class orders. He refused to remove his clothes, and when I started to do so he hit me."

"What are second-class orders?" I enquired of the coxswain.

"Never heard of them, sir. All I know is that Able Seaman Tucker was told off for the locker, but the steward comes along and takes a fancy to it."

"And what have you to say?" I asked the A.B.

"Well, sir. I was stowing my gear in the locker when the steward comes along and tells me to clear it out. I says I wouldn't, not for him, but then he starts throwing my gear on the deck. I can't stand that, sir," in a tone of righteous indignation. "So I just lands him one."

"Is Tucker's story true?" I asked the steward.

"Yes, sir, but he also called me names."

I had the greatest difficulty in controlling my face, for evidently the steward had received no more than he deserved.

"Tucker," I said. "I warn you that brawling on the mess-deck is not allowed. If you have any complaint to make you should go to the coxswain and state your case. As this is your first offence, and as you received provocation, I will caution you to be more careful in future, so don't let it occur again. You can go."

"Thank you, sir," said the culprit, moving off with a grin on his face.

"And what do you mean by your tactless behaviour?" I asked the steward, when the A.B. was out of earshot.

"I wanted the locker, sir, and as I rank with a second-class petty officer I thought"

"How long have you been in the Service?" I interrupted.

"About a month, sir. I thought it my duty as a Briton to come to sea and do my bit. I am not accustomed to this mode of life. I enjoyed a college education and subsequently took employment in a high-class office ashore. I am not in the habit of living with common sailors. . . ."

"'E's always going on like that, sir!" the coxswain burst out, unable to restrain himself. "'E's a source of trouble all round, a reg'lar nuisance. This is the fourth row he's had to-day."

I warned the steward that he was treading on very delicate ground, and that the sooner he learned to be tactful and not to treat seamen as his inferiors the better we should all get on. Whereupon he informed me that his father was a very influential man, and unless Tucker

was punished he would make things unpleasant for me by asking his parent to approach the local M.P.

Then I succumbed, and said exactly what came into my head.

The steward departed in tears.

He was, without exception, the worst steward I have ever been shipmates with. His college education had evidently unfitted him for his stewardship, and after a week of beef steak for breakfast, tripe for afternoon tea, and atrocities such as the skinning of a pheasant, the use of our damask table napkins for polishing boots, and several further altercations with the men, we suffered him to return whence he had come.

The best steward we ever had, by the way, was a bluejacket who had completed his time in the Navy before the war, but had paid his own passage home from South America when hostilities began. Out there he had been a valet-de-chambre and general factotum to some potentate, and as a cook and caterer I never knew his equal in a destroyer.

With sherry he could camouflage bully beef into salmi of game, but his *pièce de résistance*—before the days of rations—was a pudding named after the ship. Its staple ingredient was bread, but it appeared on the table in the form of a plum pudding stuffed full of currants, raisins, sultanas, and sundry other surprises in the shape of almonds and candied peel. Once, indeed, he inserted the remains of a tin of black currant jujubes. It was served piping hot with a tin of steaming straw-

berry jam poured on it. Not having a sweet tooth I never sampled it myself, but was given to understand that it was very succulent and filling at the price. At any rate, it was always in great demand whenever we had a guest dining on board, and achieved considerable popularity.

Only once did anything untoward take place, and this was the occasion when the engineer lieutenant-commander, examining the helping on his plate, unearthed a torn fragment of the *Daily Mirror* containing an announcement of "Tatcho."

"Dash my wig!" he exclaimed. "They do advertise in some deuced funny places!"

Once, seized with curiosity, we asked our bluejacket steward his lower-deck nickname.

"Oh, sir, I couldn't tell you," he answered with a grin.

We persuaded him with a promise of liquid refreshment. "Well, sir," he said at last, blushing all over. "If you reely wants to know, they always calls me 'Beery'!"

"Beery," in spite of his undeserved nickname, was a jewel of price. Once, when we had a ladies' dinner party on board during our refit in a dockyard, he came down to my cabin in the afternoon with a mysterious package done up in brown paper.

"Seein' 'as 'ow we've got skirt . . . beg pardon, I means, 'ladies,' comin' on board to-night, sir," he said, handing it to me. "I bought these ashore, thinkin' they might come in useful. I've charged them to you in your mess bill, sir."

I opened the parcel to reveal a pot of powder

and a puff, a packet of Hinde's curlers, some safety pins, a stick of life salve, and a reel of white thread with a packet of needles!

"Beery" was nothing if not thorough.

But to return to H.M.S. "Anonymous," the men, in spite of the discomfort of settling down on board, seemed quite happy. They were enthusiastic about the ship, too, and didn't mind how hard they worked to get her ready for sea.

Our vessel I should say, was named after a well-known admiral who had led the fleet into action at Copenhagen, and had subsequently become a right hand man to Nelson himself. We had got into touch with the old seadog's descendants and had adopted the family crest as our ship's badge, whereupon the relatives presented us with a portrait of the admiral for the wardroom. In return for their courtesy we asked them to come on board to see the ship and to have tea in the wardroom. They accepted.

Unfortunately, when everything was arranged, a certain senior naval officer who had a great deal to do with the fitting out of destroyers built by contract, suddenly announced his intention of coming on board to make an official inspection at 3.30 on the very afternoon of our tea party. I was in half a mind to postpone the house warming, but finally contented myself by writing to our guests to inform them of the official visit, and to ask them not to come on board until Captain —— had left. His visit, I anticipated, would last about half-an-hour.

But Captain ——, in plain clothes, did not arrive until after 4 o'clock, simultaneously

with our friends. I deputed the sub-lieutenant to keep them out of the way, but noticed them eyeing me anxiously as I followed the captain round the upper decks. He was a kind-hearted man, but had a severe expression and rather an alarming manner of speech to junior officers like myself, and on this occasion his cross-examination and remarks were even more severe than usual. I felt like a morsel of chewed string by the time the inspection was over.

When he finally left the guests came aboard and I apologised for the delay.

"I'm afraid I've rather put my foot into it," said the only male member of the party.

"How?" I enquired.

"Well, I met a man in a bowler hat on the jetty and went up to him and asked if this was the ship we were looking for. He said it was. I then asked him, quite politely, if Captain _____ had yet left her, as we'd been particularly cautioned to steer clear of him. He stared at me for a moment, and then said "No, sir, Captain _____ has not yet been on board. I am Captain _____!"

So that accounted for his acerbity of manner.

Never mind. Our first tea party was quite a success.

Two days later, crowded with officials from the Admiralty, the builders' representatives, and with the contractors' men running the engines and the firm's pilot in charge, the ship put to sea for her trials. We, the officers and men who would presently belong to her, were also on board, but as the vessel had not yet

been turned over to the Admiralty, we had no executive authority, and were ordered not to interfere except in the remote possibility of our meeting a hostile submarine.

It was a bitter day, with a fierce north-westerly wind when we sallied forth, and we dashed along at full speed under the lee of the land, with the short, steep lop sending the spray flying over us in sheets. But our triumph was very short-lived, for presently a glum-faced official appeared on the bridge from the engine-room, to say that something serious had gone wrong below, and that we should have to return into harbour. We did return, with our tail between our legs, and for another ten days the ship propped up the contractor's jetty while they put things right.

We ventured forth again, only to have the mortification of another abortive attempt, and it was not until six weeks after my first arrival that, after a third and successful trial, we finally signed the necessary document off the mouth of the harbour taking over the vessel on behalf of the Admiralty.

All that remained to be done was to embark what remained of those piles of stores and ammunition. This completed, we were ready for sea, and finally sailed at 8 o'clock on Christmas morning, with orders to make the best of our way to Portland, there to "shake down" and to carry out various exercises before joining the destroyer force at Harwich under the command of Commodore Reginald Tyrwhitt, now Rear-Admiral and a K.C.B.

We started off down the coast in fine style,

rattling along at 22 knots without the least overstraining ourselves, and rather pleased at being in one of the fastest craft afloat, and late that afternoon entered the Humber and anchored off Grimsby, with the intention of resuming the journey the next morning.

But here it was that our troubles overtook us.

During the night it came on to blow hard from the south-east, and at seven o'clock next morning, when we were weighing anchor preparatory to sailing, the cable parted at the third shackle, with the consequence that the anchor and $37\frac{1}{2}$ fathoms of cable remained in the mud at the bottom of the river. We promptly buoyed the spot and dragged for some hours with a light anchor, in the hope of hooking the cable, but our efforts were unsuccessful. It was just as we were giving it up as hopeless that the engineer officer came on to the bridge, with a face as long as a sea-boot, to say that the boilers were " priming " badly ; in other words, that water was finding its way into the turbines with the steam. If we weren't careful, he informed us glumly, we should strip the blades off our turbine rotors, which would necessitate a lengthy sojourn in a dockyard and a partial dismemberment of the ship to rectify the damage.

An immediate visit to a repairing shop was a matter of urgency, and there was nothing for it but to make a wireless signal to the local senior officer, reporting the state of affairs, and to make the best of our way up the river to Immingham, where, inside the basin, we might obtain the necessary assistance.

We started off at 12 knots with the tide in our favour, but had not gone very far before the turbines started to give trouble and our progress developed into a veritable crawl. However, we arrived at Immingham eventually, carried there by wind and tide more than by the engines; but even so, our difficulties had only just started.

The jetties at the entrance to the docks are shaped like a curved V, with a width of perhaps 100 feet at the apex and 300 feet halfway down. We had to make fast to the lee side of the weather jetty, an openwork wooden structure, through which the water ran like a mill-race and the gale whistled furiously. Wind and tide did their best to prevent our getting there, and due to the priming of the boilers there was not sufficient steam in the turbines for the engines to be properly worked. With the engine-room telegraphs to "slow," nothing happened at all. With "half" the ship still displayed a cheerful indifference, while with "full" speed she just condescended to move. In a word, our noble vessel was unmanageable.

First, after a lot of coaxing, we succeeded in getting the bows alongside and secured with our stoutest wire, while the stern, carried off by the wind and a tide running at nearly seven knots, swung halfway across the narrow entrance. Then, by working the engines, we endeavoured to get the stern alongside, with the consequence that the bow wire parted with a crack and left us driving helplessly to leeward towards a bunch of trawlers and drifters

lying alongside the other arm of the jetty. Their crews, clustered on deck to see the fun, exhibited every sign of amusement at our predicament. They grinned all over their faces.

I wrenched both telegraphs over to "Full Astern." Nothing happened.

Nearer and nearer we drifted to those trawlers, until their men suddenly came to realise that something was amiss, and that in another thirty seconds we should be into them, broadside on. And if we had struck with our 1,000 tons dead weight, they would have come off a very second best.

"Look where you're coming!" howled a man, waving his arms in frenzied agitation, while his friends busied themselves with little tenders the size of pincushions. "Go astern, can't ye?"

It was no use my retaliating by telling him we couldn't go astern. I merely watched, with my heart in my mouth, waiting for the bump. Fifty feet—thirty feet—twenty.

Then the ship, nerving herself with a supreme effort, started slowly to move backwards, faster and faster. I could have shouted for joy. The bows slid free, and in another moment we were clear. We had avoided that collision by a bare five feet.

We staggered astern into the river, to gather breath for a fresh effort, but the turbines, having saved us once, had now reached the limit of their endurance, and were gradually giving up the ghost. Finally they petered out altogether, and as we were left at the mercy of wind and tide, we let go the remaining anchor. Luckily it held.

The engineer officer, streaming with oil and perspiration, breathless, blasphemous, and vituperant, as he might well be, appeared on the bridge.

"Those hectic turbines of ours are just about the frozen limit!" he gasped, though in less polite language. "The damned things are full of water, and if that last sprint astern hasn't stripped half the blades off the rotors, I'm a perishing Dutchman! I'd like to scrag the blighters who built this ship!"

Now the engineer-lieutenant was a man who made light of difficulties. He did not convert molehills into mountains; so when he said a thing was bad, I knew it was.

"We've anchored now," I consoled him. "Shall I ask for a tug to take us alongside? I'd rather not of course. Looks so bad."

He thought for a moment, scratching his chin.

"No," he answered at length. "Too damned ignominious to creep into the basin with a tug. Let's have another shot."

"Humph," said I, not overjoyed at the prospect. "We've only got one decent wire left in the ship, and if that carries away and your box of tricks refuses to heave around, what's to become of us? I don't want to smash the blooming ship to blazes first go off."

"No-o. But suppose we keep the anchor down for a bit. If you can give me half-an-hour, I may be able to give her enough juice to get alongside."

"All right. We'll have a shot at it," I agreed. "For heaven's sake look out you have enough ginger, though."

"I'll do my best," he said, clambering down the ladder with a grin. "If she won't heave round, it'll not be my fault. Anyhow, it's my bally funeral just as much as yours!"

So we waited for half an hour, and at our next attempt, contrary to our expectations, the ship behaved like a perfect lady, and we actually succeeded in achieving the impossible without damaging ourselves or the jetty. And an hour later we were safe inside the basin, with our fires dying out, while official telegrams flew to and fro between ourselves, the Admiralty, and the ship's builders. Somebody had to "get it in the neck!"

It took them ten whole days and nights to put the matter right, so our first sea trip was not exactly auspicious.

3

We eventually arrived at Portland early in January, 1915, where we spent a fortnight carrying out gunnery and torpedo exercises and accustoming officers and men to the ship. Nothing really remarkable occurred during this time, though on two separate occasions, feeling very warlike, we were sent to sea at dead of night, once to hunt an alleged submarine reported within half a mile of the coast, and on the other occasion to investigate a sailing vessel which was said to be hovering round in a highly suspicious manner, and supplying fuel to the enemy "U" boats.

Submarines certainly were active in the locality, for early on New Year's Day the "Formidable" had been sunk with the loss

of many lives ; but ours did not materialise. As for the suspicious sailing-vessel, of which we had been given full details, even to a remarkable white patch in her mainsail, it was nothing more nor less than a Brixham trawler, whose crew held up their hands in horror, and abused us in the choicest Devonshire when we sent an armed party on board to search her.

But early in 1915 the submarine activity was just beginning, and people living on the coast who had never seen an underwater craft in their lives, now saw them nearly every day, and did not hesitate to inform the Admiralty.

One reverend gentleman reported a periscope, an object little bigger than a broomstick, at a distance of fifteen miles ; while another was seen by a lady proceeding at full speed—the periscope, I mean, not the lady—up an unimportant estuary usually navigated by barges, not a thousand miles from Torquay. She added, as corroborative evidence, that the periscope was moving rapidly up the river against the tide, and that it had all but capsized one of the fairway buoys. What the submarine intended to do inside the river did not transpire, but on investigating the chart a depth of about 12 feet was discovered in the spot where the aquatic monster had been sighted. The smallest submarine, when submerged, draws 30 feet of water with the top of her periscope just showing above the surface !

The lady, who had never seen a periscope in her life, but was acquainted with things nautical through a first cousin who had been

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the master of a steamer in the New Zealand coasting trade, is reported to have been asked what the thing looked like.

"Look like?" she repeated, with a snort of indignation. "Why, a thing like a snake, of course!"

Evidently the sea serpent is no myth.

4

When we reached Harwich late in January, the loss of the "Amphion," the sinking of the "Königin Luise," the battle of the Heligoland Bight, and the Christmas Day air-raid on Cuxhaven, were almost forgotten. We arrived there on January 26th, two days after the engagement on the Dogger Bank resulting in the sinking of the "Blucher," and just in time to see Commodore Tyrwhitt's light cruiser squadron and destroyers returning after the engagement.

I remember our feelings of mortification as they steamed into harbour, how envious we were, and how bitterly we regretted those days wasted on the abortive trials off the Tyne, and the subsequent breakdown in the Humber. Had it not been for these delays we should probably have taken part in the action. All round us we saw battle-scarred veterans of the various "scraps" we had read about, the "Arethusa" who had so distinguished herself at Heligoland, the destroyers "Laurel" and "Liberty" who had been badly knocked about on the same occasion, but were now in running order again—these, and many others. We had not been blooded. We had still to

learn our job, and, as the latest comers, we felt like very small new boys joining a very big school.

We hoped, when our turn came, that we should be as good as they, but our chance was a very long time in coming. Indeed, though we trailed our coats across the North Sea and in and about the Heligoland Bight many times during 1915, we never saw the Bosche Fleet. Several times they were reported at sea, and, with the Grand Fleet from the north, we hurried forth at full speed to intercept them. But there was no luck. In spite of the bombastic reports in the enemy press, the horizon over towards the German coast was invariably empty, and except for a narrow fringe of water round the hostile shore, the North Sea was still essentially British.

It was in May or June, 1915, by which time the German submarine campaign was beginning to develop and the sinking of merchant shipping was rapidly increasing, that our flotilla of "M Class" destroyers and a light cruiser were sent to Plymouth. We spent several weeks escorting traffic and hunting submarines in and about the western approaches of the Channel and the southern part of the Irish Sea, and though I have no particular recollections of this period, except that we were always at sea, I well remember the impression made on our minds by the sight of a mournful little string of abandoned boats belonging to a sunken ship. We searched the spot for any traces of survivors, but the men had been rescued by a patrol boat some hours before.

Then came a spell of escorting transports laden with troops from Belfast to Liverpool, varied by an occasional trip from the latter port to the south-west of Ireland with transports bound to the Mediterranean. We had fair weather and foul weather, sometimes thick fogs or heavy south-westerly gales, but it was monotonous work. Submarines were constantly being reported, and we had many abortive hunts, but never once did we have the luck to sight one. They always seemed to appear in other people's areas, and we were not at all sorry when at last the order came for us to return to our base on the east coast.

The year 1915, from the point of view of the Navy in home waters, was perhaps the most uneventful of the war. We were always at sea, but the enemy's big ships rarely showed themselves abroad, while the submarine campaign had not reached its really critical stage. With the battle of Jutland, the activity in the Dover area, and the increasing efficiency of the German submarine warfare, 1916 was perhaps the most exciting year of the war from our point of view, while 1917, with the submarine activity at its zenith and the toll of sinkings mounting up and up, was probably the most dangerous for the country.

But as the number and individual efficiency of the hostile underwater craft became greater, so our anti-submarine measures became more and more efficacious. Whatever horror we may feel in our hearts at the methods of barbarism adopted by the German submarine commanders, their sinking of hospital ships

carrying wounded, their deliberate drowning of innocent women and children, few British seamen can fail to have a certain sneaking admiration in their minds for the pluck of the men who carried on this warfare. Though they were working under the orders of a Higher Command, their senseless brutality can never be condoned, but it must be admitted that they were brave. Chivalrous or gallant they certainly were not ; but brave, yes.

It does ~~not~~ take courage of a high order to put out to sea in the knowledge that of every five submarines which sailed from German harbours two, or possibly three, might never return. It was not a question of dying a clean and honourable death in action in God's air. It was a matter of being blown up by mines, sunk by bombs or depth-charges, entangled in submerged nets, or destroyed by gunfire—drowned in a steel hull like rats in a cage, perishing, perhaps, by slow suffocation at the bottom of the sea. The crews of the "U" boats had little chance of coming out alive if their vessels came to grief.

Our submarine officers who have served in the Heligoland Bight, the Baltic, and the Dardanelles know the conditions in which their enemies worked. They will tell you that the British submarine personnel, particularly towards the end of the war, when the Germans were at their wits ends' for trained officers and men, was far and away better, and that, if the conditions of affairs had been reversed, the tale of sinkings would have been very much greater. The targets for our submarines were

few and far between. Those for the Germans were scattered all over the broad ocean, or collected together in convoys, and sometimes the hidden enemy failed most miserably to achieve success. But there is hardly a British submarine officer who will not admit that his "opposite number" was brave, for brave he certainly was, whatever else we may think of him.

CHAPTER III

A MISHAP IN THE BIGHT

THE dawn broke bright and clear in a cloudless sky. There was every prospect of fine weather, for the glass had been steady for days. There was hardly a breath of wind or a ripple on the calm sea, which, polished like a mirror, shone and glittered in the pale rose, mauve, and gold of the rising sun. Our spirits rose as the great orb topped the horizon and sailed off into space, for it really seemed as if our long-hoped-for "stunt" was about to come off at last.

We were well to the eastward of the meridian of 6° East, steaming into the Heligoland Bight on an easterly course. Our formation could be likened to the prongs of a trident, the centre one represented by four light cruisers in single line, with a couple of seaplane-carriers astern of them, and the outer ones consisting of two 'columns of destroyers guarding the heavier ships from submarine attacks.

The object of our expedition was to carry out a seaplane attack and reconnaissance on the enemy's bases, and it was not the first occasion

we had entered the Bight with this end in view. It was early in the war, before the days of large aircraft-carriers with flying-off decks, and our "stunts" had to be carried out with ex-cross Channel passenger steamers, chartered at the outbreak of war and, fitted with the necessary hangars for housing the machines. The sea-planes themselves had to be started off by hoisting them out of their parent ships and allowing them to fly off the water, for which the weather conditions had to be perfect. We had attempted it many times before, but had generally been prevented. Sometimes it was too rough or too windy for the machines to be hoisted out. Sometimes, though the sea was calm, there was a heavy swell, while, on one occasion, having reached our rendezvous near Borkum, a lurking submarine enlivened the proceedings by firing a torpedo which narrowly missed a light cruiser, whereat we were forced to retire from the scene at full speed. But more generally there was a blinding fog in which the machines could not be relied upon to find their objectives. 

And we, looking for a little excitement after weeks and months of monotony with never a sight of the Bosche, hated these baulking fogs of the Heligoland Bight. They were very prevalent during the fine weather in spring, summer, and autumn, and there seemed to be no happy mean between a full gale from the south-westward, which made us wet and rather miserable, and a dense opaqueness, in which destroyers lost touch with one another and wandered about the ocean howling on their

syrens as they looked for their mates. Often and often those fogs spoilt our expeditions for the discomfort of the Bosche, and as often we were forced to return to our base with our tails between our legs and nothing accomplished.

We all realised that these air-raids might lead to something big. Behind us, out of sight over the rim of the horizon, we had a supporting squadron of battle-cruisers, and beyond them, perhaps, the battle squadrons of the Grand Fleet. The seaplanes would stir up the hornet's nest, and the enemy might send out a light squadron to drive us—the inshore force—out to sea. Our battle cruisers might then come in to support us, and if the enemy got the worst of it he might even be tempted to send out a portion of his High Sea Fleet, in which case our battleships might get the chance they so longed for. There was no knowing what might happen. A simple air-raid might quite conceivably culminate in a fleet action—the very thing the Navy prayed for.

And on this particular morning the weather conditions seemed perfect for our enterprise, for in less than an hour, having reached the appointed spot, the seaplane carriers would stop and hoist out their machines while the destroyers circled discretely round to screen them from submarine attack. When once the seaplanes had started forth on their raid the whole force would then proceed to another position, where, in a couple of hours or so, the bombers, their work done, would rejoin us.

The time passed rapidly, and a quarter of

an hour before the operation was due to start, the blue and white striped "Preparative" flag fluttered out at the masthead of the leading light cruiser, the "Arethusa," bearing the broad pennant of our commodore. The sun, now well up in the sky, still bathed us in its brilliance, but I noticed that to the eastward the horizon was fast becoming blurred and indistinct.

"Fog, by the look of it," I remarked to the first lieutenant.

"I'm afraid it is," he agreed mournfully. "Hope to goodness it won't be thick enough to stop the show. Perhaps it's only one of those thin mists."

I hoped so too, but a few minutes later there came a cold, clammy feeling in the air, and I noticed the tall mastheads of the nearer light cruisers slowly becoming hidden in wreathing eddies of mist.

"Negative, sir," shouted the signalman, as a white flag bearing five black crosses showed for an instant at the level of the "Arethusa's" bridge, and then climbed slowly aloft, to disappear in the murk.

"That's torn it!" exclaimed Number One, with a grunt of disgust. "Just like our cursed luck!"

As we watched we saw the slim shape of the "Arethusa" suddenly swallowed up in a bank of vapour. At one moment her hull was in clear view; the next, it had disappeared utterly, like a dissolving picture on a screen. The second ship vanished after her—then the third and fourth. The next moment we ourselves steamed into a wall of fog so dense

that even our next ahead, a bare hundred and fifty yards distant, was quite invisible.

The fog had shut down so suddenly that it took us by surprise, and we were still steaming at twenty knots straight into the heart of it. There were some twenty vessels present in close formation, each one wrapped in her own little circle of murk and out of sight of her consorts. The visibility was perhaps a hundred yards, and all we could do was to steer steadily by compass and to keep a watchful eye upon the trail of whitened water in the wake of the next ahead.

A syren started yelping frenziedly somewhere fine on the starboard bow. The signalman put a megaphone to his ear and listened intently as it talked with the longs and shorts of the morse code.

'Signal for ten knots, sir,' he reported at last.

The dismal screeching was taken up by ship after ship as it passed down the line. Then came the long-drawn-out howl of the "executive," signifying that the purport of the signal was to be obeyed. "Executive" is explained in the next sentence.

Our revolution telegraph clanged noisily as the speed was decreased, but the moment we eased, our difficulties in keeping station became accentuated. At twenty knots a destroyer leaves a disturbed track in the water which is easy enough to follow, but at ten there is nothing but a slight flattened swirling, which is difficult to distinguish with any certainty. The fog had thickened appreciably. The de-

stroyer ahead of us, moreover, seemed to have slowed down more than she should, for suddenly I saw the blurred shape of her stern looming up out of the murk within a few yards of our bows. We were coming up fast, for at first I could see her stern only, then her upper deck as far as the after funnel, and finally her bridge.

Our telegraph rattled at once and we sheered slightly out of the line, while I picked up a megaphone and hailed her.

"Minx!" I shouted. "What speed are you going?"

"Seven knots!" came back the reply. "I'm right on top of my next ahead. I wish to heaven someone would teach the blighter to steer a steady course. He's all over the shop like a bloomin' serpent!"

"For the Lord's sake don't lose him!" I howled back, as we started to drop astern.

"Hope not," floated back. "At present they're all bunched up anyhow ahead of me. I've got three of 'em in sight now, blast 'em!"

And if they were bunched up ahead the tail of the line was also to suffer from the same complaint, for glancing aft I soon saw the sharp bow of the next astern dangerously close to our port quarter. I hailed her to warn her of the reduction in speed, whereat her skipper, whose nerves were evidently a little ragged, waxed wrath and demanded to know what the blue blazes we thought we were playing at. I retaliated.

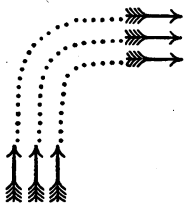
Station keeping in a fog at sea is always apt to try people's tempers; but in destroyers,

which are not adapted for steaming at slow speeds and are sluggish on their helms at anything under ten knots, the conditions are unusually annoying. If a ship in the front of the line finds herself creeping rapidly up on her next ahead, she may sometimes be forced to avoid collision by sheering abruptly out of the line and reducing her speed substantially, which means that her next astern will overhaul her and will have to ease down in turn. The retrograde movement is thus transmitted right down the line, getting worse as it goes on, so that the column becomes "telescoped" and the unfortunate vessel at the tail of the procession has generally to stop her engines to avoid a bump. And early in 1915, while the war was yet young, we were still rather new to the game. Later on, when we had had more experience, we grew wiser to the tricks of the trade and discovered, among a multitude of other things, that if each ship burnt a search-light and directed it aft, the luminous blur could be seen at a far greater distance through fog than the hull of a ship. We had a lot to learn in the early days of the war. We profited, as a rule, by bitter experience.

The commodore's syren started howling again as it spelt out another signal. This time it was an alteration of course eight points, or a right angle, to starboard and was to be carried out leaders together the remainder in succession, preserving the order of the squadron.

Imagine the trident points upwards, thus  the middle prong being the light cruiser, line and the outer prongs the columns of

destroyers. It was desired to wheel the whole body round until they were travelling thus:— and as the centre, or guiding, column would maintain its speed of ten knots, it followed that the starboard column, the pivot, so to speak, would have to ease down and alter to the new course at once.



The movement, in fact, was a wheel, in which the pivot column would swing round on its heel, the centre column would alter course gradually, while the port column would swing round more gradually still and would have to increase its speed to about fifteen knots to maintain its correct position. Our ship was in the centre of the port column.

It was not a very difficult movement to carry out in clear weather, but in thick fog, when no ship could see another, it was rather more complicated.

The "executive" signal was made and the manœuvre started, while we, increasing speed, bustled on in the churned-up wake of our next ahead, edging gradually round to starboard as we went.

Looking out ahead one could see nothing except the grey blanket of fog and the track in the water which we were following. For a few minutes everything went well. Then, quite suddenly, we heard three shrill blasts from the second destroyer ahead of us, meaning "I am going full speed astern." It was almost immediately followed by frenzied shouting,

then an appalling, smashing thud and the unmistakable sounds of rending steel.

Two ships had collided !

It had all taken place so quickly that it was impossible at the time to fully understand what had happened. In the light of after events, however, it seems that the second destroyer ahead of us had lost touch with the ship ahead of her, and, altering course too abruptly, found herself steaming at fifteen knots straight into one of the light cruisers which was still on the original course. On sighting her through the fog at a distance of about sixty yards, she at once reversed her engines ; but it was too late. She crashed into her big sister just abaft the port beam, striking her almost at right angles.

My impressions of what happened subsequently are naturally a little blurred, but in that instant everything seemed flung into confusion with ships steaming in all directions. The first thing I remember seeing was a great grey mass looming up out of the fog barely forty yards dead ahead. It was the light cruiser which has been rammed. She was stopped, but, slewed round by the impact, was heading in the opposite direction to ourselves.

We were steaming at fifteen knots. We should cover that forty yards in something under five seconds, and one cannot pull up a dead weight of a thousand tons travelling at that speed in anything under three ship's lengths, say three hundred yards. The only possible thing to do to was turn.

"Hard a' port!" I shouted. "Full speed astern starboard!"

Our syren shrieked madly. The ship hesitated and then started to turn, and we slithered past the larger vessel broadside to broadside, with perhaps twenty feet to spare.

We could see she was badly damaged, for she was listing over to port, while the boatswain's pipes were twittering on board as the men set about placing the collision mat over a great V-shaped gash in her side, through which the water was pouring.

"Destroyer!" someone yelled at us from her bridge, as we moved slowly past. "Stand by us. We are badly damaged!"

"Aye aye, sir," I shouted back.

We travelled on, with the intention of circling round to head our ship in the same direction as the light cruiser, so as to be ready to go alongside in case of necessity, and as we did so, another object showed up out of the fog on our starboard bow. This time it was the destroyer who had done the damage.

She was a sorry plight. Her forecastle was half its original length, with some twenty feet of her bow flattened aft like a concertina, until the muzzle of the foremost 4-inch gun projected out over the water as if it were mounted on the edge of a cliff. Through her torn and twisted plating we could see right into her mess-decks, while the deck of her forecastle, or what remained of it, was bent down at right angles, until the stem head was almost touching the water. Her men also were placing a collision mat, while another

destroyer was standing by to render what assistance she could and to take her in tow astern.

"Large ship crossing our bows, sir!" came a frantic hail from the lookout on our forecastle.

I looked ahead, and there, moving rapidly from starboard to port across our bows, was the heavy white bow-wave of another light cruiser. It cannot have been more than fifty yards away.

"Full speed astern both!" I ordered, my heart in my mouth.

Our syren blared thrice, but we were still moving ahead, and so close was the other vessel that collision seemed a foregone conclusion. First I saw her hull, then her masts, and finally her three funnels. I felt physically ill and gripped the bridge rails, bracing myself for the crash which I felt must come. The men on the forecastle came rushing aft to a place of safety.

On this occasion, due, no doubt, to my state of mind, the ship seemed unduly sluggish, and how we avoided hitting the other vessel I do not pretend to know. The length of that cruiser seemed interminable, and all the time we were drawing nearer and nearer, until our distance apart could be measured in feet.

I attribute our escape to good joss and the splendid efforts of our engine-room staff, who, realising that something was wrong, gave the turbines every ounce of steam they could to drive them astern and to check our way. At last I saw the cruiser's rounded stern flitting past our bows. We had actually missed

striking her by less than a fathom, but even as we flashed past the irresistible funny man on the cruiser's quarterdeck wrinkled his face in a grimace and placed his extended fingers to his nose. I could gladly have wrung his neck.

"Strewth!" came a relieved voice from our forecastle. "'Old me up, Charlie! Poor auntie's all of a tremble!"

The whole incident lasted about thirty seconds. It had seemed more like half an hour.

It was an unpleasant state of affairs. We were far into the Heligoland Bight, within about twenty miles of Borkum, and as wireless had been used the chances were quite a hundred to one that the ever-watchful Bosche had heard it, and was fully aware that we were in the neighbourhood and that something untoward had taken place. We had one light-cruiser damaged, but which, with any luck, might be able to hobble home under her own steam. Also a cruelly mangled destroyer, which, if she did not actually sink, would probably have to be towed slowly back, stern first.

There was a thick fog to shield us, it is true, and we prayed that it might continue; but, now that the worst had happened, the weather with its usual contrariness, might quite easily clear and leave us in rather a precarious position.

One could hardly imagine a German squadron with two of its units incapacitated getting safely home from a position twenty miles off the British coast if anyone in England was aware of it, and if the fog did lift and the enemy sent a

squadron to harry our retreat we might have rather an unenviable time with two lame ducks to look after. But, though our operators heard the German wireless signals becoming more and more active, sure sign that they were aware of our presence, nothing happened. In those days we were inclined to give our opponents credit for more energy and cunning than they really deserved, for, if the truth be known, they missed many opportunities of doing us damage. This was one of them.

The injured light cruiser, having done what she could to patch up the enormous rent in her side with a collision mat*, an affair some 20 feet square made of several thicknesses of stout canvas closely threaded, or "thrumbed," on its inner side until it resembles a thick carpet, was presently able to proceed at slow speed on her way home, escorted, in case of accidents, by one other destroyer besides ourselves.

The fog still held as thick as ever throughout the day, and that afternoon we heard the eerie

* For the benefit of the non-naval reader it is as well to explain that the collision mat, secured at its upper corner by a "lowering line," at the side corners by ropes passing forward and aft known as "fore and afters," and at the bottom corner by a chain "bottom line" passing right underneath the ship, is lowered over the hole and the lines then secured. The pumps then expel the water from the compartment inside, while the pressure outside forces the mat against the edges of the gash and forms a more or less water-tight joint. The water still trickles through, but in much less volume than if the compartments were open to the sea. The use of a collision mat has saved many a ship from foundering, but is necessarily of little use if the damage is of greater extent than the size of the mat. Moreover, there is always the chance of the lines carrying away, due to the movement of the ship through the water, or the mat being sucked right in through the cavity.

dirge of the big ship's bugles sounding the "Last Post" and the crackle of three volleys, as the mortal remains of some poor fellow were committed to the sea.

It was the first intimation we received that she had suffered any casualties in the collision. We did not know until afterwards that one man had been killed instantaneously and that two more had been badly injured. One man killed—a small toll of human life, but our hearts were sad as we steamed home. Some poor woman in England had given her all in the service of the country.

Our passage passed without further incident, and in due course the fog lifted and we reached the English coast, where, having seen the damaged vessel well on her way towards Chatham dockyard, we destroyers returned to our base.

The battered destroyer was less lucky. At first she managed to struggle along at slow speed. Then her cruelly distorted bulkheads in the bows showed signs of collapsing, and she had to be taken in tow, stern first, by a consort. Next the fog rolled away, the glass dropped, and the wind began to rise from the south-west, bringing in its wake the short, steep lop peculiar to the southern portion of the North Sea. Within an hour or two it was blowing a gale and the sea had become dangerous.

The towing destroyer struggled bravely on, but the helpless hulk astern of her, dragged stern first against the sea, yawed wildly in her course and became unmanageable. Finally the 4½-inch steel towing-wire parted, and the

damaged craft was left plunging and rolling violently in the trough of the sea, with her damaged bulkheads sagging ominously. Then a light cruiser took her in tow with a stouter wire. All went well for an hour or two, during which they made slow progress to the westward; but then the inevitable happened, the tow parted, and again the unfortunate ship was left at the mercy of wind and wave.

Finally the commodore himself appeared on the scene in the "Arethusa" and succeeded in getting a coir hawser on board the wreck, to the end of which was attached the cruiser's chain cable. The cable had to be hauled on board by sheer manual labour, every soul in the destroyer tailing on to the hawser and fighting for every inch. At times the heavy rolling of the ship flung the men off their feet and sent them sliding along the slippery deck. The seas broke on board continually, washing them this way and that, drenching them to the skin, but inch by inch the hawser came home. Sometimes the lift of the seas almost tore it from their grasp and they lost a fathom or more before it could be checked, but, exhausted and chilled though they were, they hung doggedly on.

It took over three hours of mortal, back-breaking work before the end of the cable was finally dragged on board and secured, and how they succeeded in accomplishing it was a miracle. But of the many admirable qualities of British bluejackets—and in using the term "bluejacket" I refer to the whole lower deck personnel—their dogged persistence and pluck

in the face of overwhelming difficulties is perhaps the most pleasing. They are always seen at their best in circumstances of danger, and on this occasion, as on many others, it was due to the wonderful "never say die" characteristic of the men that the damaged ship was finally got home.

The conditions might well have knocked the heart out of other people, and, without exaggerating unduly, the state of affairs might quite well have been represented to the senior officer in such a light that he might have ordered the abandonment of the ship and her destruction by gunfire. But this way out of the difficulty never occurred to them. They achieved the impossible.

CHAPTER IV

A MERE SPASM

I

A GRILLING summer afternoon, with a sun blazing overhead in a cloudless sky. The grounds of the Sports Club were crowded, and on each of the sanded tennis courts play was in full swing. From the tea-room came the buzz of conversation and the clatter of crockery, while sitting outside on the benches, waiting their turn to play, were many naval and military officers and their wives, naval wives whose husbands were away at sea, and the few real civilians that remained in the place.

It was a representative gathering of both services, and khaki tunics and blue, gold-laced monkey jackets worn with white flannel trousers mingled with the white summer dresses of the women. Here was a red-tabbed staff officer of the local garrison, there the commanding officer of a submarine who had returned the same morning from his ten-days' vigil in and about the minefields of the Heligoland Bight. There was a subaltern with the Military Cross ribbon and a couple of wound stripes on his

sleeve, who had been invalided home from France, and was doing a spell of " light duty " before returning thither ; a destroyer officer who had been " strafing " the Hun off Zeebrugge at some ungodly hour the same morning, but had arrived in harbour just in time to get on his bicycle and pedal furiously up the hill from the landing-place to keep his tennis engagement.

There were naval officers from every sort of ship in the harbour, light cruisers, depot ships, destroyers, and submarines. They varied in rank from post-captains to acting sub-lieutenants and midshipmen R.N.V.R., and but for the fact that they all wore uniform jackets, war seemed very far away.

Our leave in the Harwich Force was as liberal as leave could possibly be in time of war. We spent no small portion of our days and nights at sea, but except for those on board a light cruiser and the " duty division " of four destroyers, who kept steam at short notice and were ready for any emergency, the rest of us were allowed ashore in the afternoons between 1.30 and 7. And when we did get ashore we enjoyed the amenities of civilisation and the society of womenfolk, for which we were duly grateful. We were lucky, far luckier from the point of view of leave than the officers and men in the Grand Fleet flotillas at Scapa Flow.

But since Harwich, as the seagull flies, was a bare seventy miles from that hotbed of German iniquity, the Belgian coast, our life was one of constant comings and goings.

Much of our time at sea was spent in escorting mercantile traffic to and fro between the English coast and Rotterdam, work which was carried on till the very end of the war with comparatively little loss, despite the proximity of the enemy submarine and destroyer bases at Zeebrugge and Ostend. On these trips, until the Dutch authorities removed it, the red hull of the Noord Hinder light-vessel by day, and its winking light at night, was our half-way milestone. Its neighbourhood was a favourite rendezvous for German submarines, and formed a happy hunting ground for the British submarines sent there to stalk them. German destroyers from Zeebrugge, moreover, frequently appeared in its vicinity, generally to be chased at full speed back to their habitat by a British flotilla yelping at their heels like a pack of hounds.

The light keepers in the Noord Hinder occupied the stage box as strictly neutral observers, and their story, if they could tell it, would not be without interest. It would be a tale of constant aerial fights between British and German aircraft, of Zeppelins streaking overhead in the dusk, of mysterious explosions, and of fleeting visions of periscopes, or maybe the low, grey shapes of British and German submarines. But above all, it would be a yarn of the shapes of unknown destroyers steaming past at full speed in the darkness, their phosphorescent wakes trailing out astern of them as they sped to the eastward. Sometimes the deep indigo of the night would be broken by the ruby sparkle of gun flashes

and the pale, bluish-white brilliance of star-shell, while the air throbbed and trembled to the reports, sometimes close and very loud, sometimes faint like the growling of distant thunder, but always receding to the eastward.

In the grey half-light of the next dawn they might see a British flotilla returning to its base, one or two of its vessels with punctured funnels, battered bridges, and deck fittings suspiciously awry ; but with dingy White Ensigns still fluttering triumphantly in the morning breeze. Sometimes a destroyer might appear towing a stricken consort leaning over to an uncanny angle with her deck level dangerously near the water, while the rest of the flotilla, spread out around her, shielded their damaged consort from submarine attack.

And some of the destroyers who flashed past the Noord Hinder on those outward journeys never returned. Their hulls, riven by torpedo or mine explosions, or perforated by shell-fire, had sunk quietly to their last commissions in the grey North Sea—they, with many of the gallant souls who had manned them, our friends and our flotilla mates.

Our general cruising ground was sometimes in the neighbourhood of the Heligoland Bight, sometimes off the Dutch coast, anywhere between the Texel, the Maas lightship, and the Schouwen Bank, and at night, since we might meet the enemy at any moment, our men were always at "action stations," our guns and torpedoes always ready. It is one of the first axioms of destroyer warfare that the man who hits first generally wins, and when there

was a possibility of tumbling across a hostile destroyer at a range of 500 yards or less on a dark night, we were not leaving anything to chance.

We lived at the enemy's front-door, so to speak, and had long been accustomed to sudden excursions to sea at all hours of the day and night. The signal "Q.O."—"Raise steam with all despatch and report when ready"—had long since lost its novelty. When it did come, it generally meant that the enemy was at sea, so there was no dallying. Officers and men, if ashore, were immediately recalled to their ships by pre-arranged syren signals and by telephone. The harbour became enveloped in rolling clouds of black smoke as the oil-fired light cruisers and destroyers raised steam with all speed, and in little more than an hour we were off.

These "spasms," as the men called them, sometimes proved to be false alarms, and after waiting for an hour or two we might revert to the usual notice for steam. But more often than not they meant the real thing, perhaps a dash to intercept German destroyers stealing up or down the Dutch coast on their way between Endem and Zeebrugge, possibly a full-speed run to the northward if the High Sea Fleet had ventured to poke their noses outside their harbours. We lived on the proverbial "split yarn," but nobody developed neurasthenia. On the contrary, the life seemed to agree with officers and men alike, and it was not looked upon as anything at all incongruous to be chasing a Hun at breakfast-

time, and, assisted by one's wife, to be hoeing potatoes in one's garden by three o'clock in the afternoon.

What the wives themselves thought about it is quite a different matter, though outwardly they were just the same as usual, cheerful and smiling. Nobody but themselves can ever quite realise what heart-pangs they felt when they saw their husbands' ships, cruisers, destroyers, or submarines, steaming out to sea. They were fully aware what it meant. They knew that on occasions some of these vessels they had seen skirting the line of buoys at the harbour entrance never returned. Many of them had helped to console newly-made widows in the first poignant agony of their widowhood, and at any moment their own turn might come.

But they never flinched. There was not a naval wife in the place who would have admitted that she was glad if her husband had been transferred to a "shore job" far away from the danger zone. On the contrary, they took an overwhelming pride in the fact that their men were doing their share.

The women were very brave, very patient, and very loyal, and in the long days and nights of waiting for what the future might bring, they never showed the least sign of the anxiety which was ever clawing at their hearts. They were not alone. Their sisters all over the Empire were sharing the same feelings. All glory to them.

And on this particular afternoon war seemed very far away. To shut one's eyes and listen to the conversation, the thud of the racquets

and the shouts of the tennis-players, one might almost imagine oneself back in the palmy days of peace, those blissful days when we had landed in mufti, and were at liberty to remain ashore for the night, if we wished to.

"Come on! It's your turn," said my wife. "Those people on the next court are just finishing. Where are the others?"

"Having tea," I told her.

"If you will go and rout them out I will keep the court," she said. "Make them hurry up."

I divested myself of my coat and went to the club-house to find our opponents; but even as I entered the door, the telephone bell burst forth in a jangle.

The steward unhooked the receiver and put it to his ear. "Yes," he said. "This is the Sports Club.—What?—Yes, I've got it. All officers of cruisers and destroyers to return to their ships at once.—Right. Thank you."

"Oh, damn!" I thought to myself, running out again. "That's torn it!"

I found my coat, flung it on, whispered something in the ear of some of the officers sitting on the benches, who instantly jumped to their feet and started apologising to their partners, and hailed my wife, who had already taken possession of the vacant court.

"I must be off," I whispered, as she came towards me.

"Recalled?" she queried, looking rather troubled.

"Yes."

"Have you any idea what it means?" she asked.

"Not a ghost of a notion," I answered. "I must run. I haven't too much time."

"All right," she said with a sigh. "If you go home and change, I'll be there before you leave."

The news soon became common property, and as I clutched my racket and ran, play ceased abruptly, and practically every naval officer present darted for his coat. The tea-room emptied itself in a twinkling. People telephoned hurriedly for taxis, or asked others to give them a lift. Some, mounting their bicycles, pedalled off at full speed, while still more, like myself, ran home to their houses to change before undertaking the two-mile sprint down the dusty road towards the landing-place.

My house, luckily, was fairly close, and within seven minutes I had changed, had said "au revoir" to my wife, and was running up the hill towards the main road. Five minutes later, hot, dusty, and rather dishevelled, I was picked up by a taxi already overladen with a dozen officers, some inside, some hanging on to the footboards, a couple on the bonnet, and three perched precariously on the roof.

The lady driver surpassed herself. We drove down the hill to Parkeston Quay in a cloud of dust, and at a speed which caused the vehicle to lurch like a destroyer in a gale of wind. We passed numbers of other motors similarly laden, officers on motor bicycles and ordinary "push-bikes," and a steady stream of gasping pedestrians with purple faces running alongside.

No destroyer flotilla is ever quite complete

without its dogs, and almost every other officer we passed seemed to have an animal with him. Their name was legion ; terriers, rough-haired, smooth-haired, Irish and Welsh ; Sealyhams with their absurd little legs going sixteen to the dozen ; a bull-terrier or two ; a bull dog waddling along at full speed, like a battleship pressed for time ; a Dandie Dinmont, with his low-hung grey body almost touching the ground—dogs like doormats, dogs like Teddy-bears, dogs of unknown ancestry, of every shape, colour, tribe and size, tearing at full speed after their perspiring masters, and quite entering into the spirit of the thing.

How we ever reached Parkeston without losing overboard one of the adventurous young gentlemen on the roof, or without running someone or something down, I cannot imagine. We must have achieved it in record time, however, for within half-an-hour of the telephone message arriving at the Sports Club we found ourselves at the landing-place, where a concourse of motor-boats, whalers, and skiffs from the various ships awaited our arrival. In another ten minutes we were on board our respective vessels, changing hurriedly into sea-going clothes, and half an hour later, by which time steam had been reported ready, a signal fluttered out at the masthead of the senior officer's ship.

"Signal to slip and proceed out of harbour, sir," said the signalman, putting down his glass.

The end of the wire slip-rope fell into the water with a splash, and the buoy surged ahead. The engine-room telegraphs tinkled, and we started to move slowly down the river.

Twenty minutes later, six light cruisers and about twenty destroyers were forming up outside the harbour, and turning aside for a moment, I focussed my binoculars on the little red-roofed house that was my home as it flashed momentarily into sight through a gap in the intervening buildings. The glasses were good ones, and though it was three miles away I saw the flutter of a white skirt in the porch.

I waved, rather uselessly, for she could not see me.

2

There was no moon, and with the entire absence of wind to dispel the thin mist overhanging the surface of the water, the visibility was reduced to a bare thousand yards. The sea itself was oily calm. There was no splash and thunder of breaking waves, merely the hiss and tinkle of our bow wave, and the occasional shrill, protesting cry of some seabird in its sleep as we drove along at twenty knots.

The reason for our hurried departure was not far to seek. British aircraft, in their everlasting patrol of the Belgian coast, had reported unwonted activity during the early afternoon on the part of the German destroyers at Zeebrugge. It might mean that the enemy contemplated one of his favourite "tip and run" raids on the Dover Patrol, in which case our party would be too far to the northward to share in the excitement. On the other hand, as he had not done it lately, the Bosche might be thinking of a sudden dash north, to raid our outlying patrols between the Thames and Yarmouth, or perhaps the Zeebrugge

flotilla was under orders to return to Emden *via* the Dutch coast.

The enemy were known to be in the habit of relieving their Belgian coast detachments at irregular intervals. They had every reason to do so, for both Zeebrugge and Bruges, which latter, with its connecting canal, was also used as a destroyer base, were subjected almost every night to the unwelcome attentions of our bombing aircraft.

The Germans, no whit behind hand, retaliated most lustily upon Dunkerque, and a plan of that town, marked where bombs had actually fallen, resembled the body of a child suffering from nettlerash.

Dunkerque was not a pleasant harbour to lie in. Sometimes it underwent as many as seven separate air-raids in a single night, but though many bombs exploded in the crowded inner harbour, comparatively few vessels were actually hit. We knew the place of old. Once, in broad daylight, a bomb, bursting in the water within sixty feet of the ship, had destroyed most of the crockery in the wardroom pantry.

Ashore, however, it was quite a different matter. Any bomb dropped upon a crowded town is practically certain of killing someone, and though it is true that the good people of Dunkerque had come to regard the air-raids of "ces sales Bosches" with a certain amount of apathy, casualties were very numerous. And if Dunkerque was unhealthy, Zeebrugge, Bruges and Ostend, on account of our hardly-won supremacy in the air, were

doubly so. No wonder German destroyer and submarine officers were reported to suffer from lack of sleep, neurasthenia, and a consequent love for the bottle. No wonder they had to be relieved by fresh blood from time to time.

Our orders were quite simple. A flotilla leader and two divisions of destroyers, eight in all, were to proceed to a rendezvous off the Schouwen Bank, to cruise between there and the Maas light-vessel off the Hook of Holland. Another group of four was to patrol outside territorial waters between the Maas and Ymuiden, while the light cruiser force, with the remaining destroyers, were to cruise further seaward and between the advanced forces to act as a reinforcement if touch were gained with the enemy.

The night, considering the time of year, was distinctly chilly, and the men, sitting round the guns and torpedo tubes, were muffled to the eyes in comforters and thick "lammy coats." They had long since become accustomed to the habit of turning night into day, deprivation of sleep which was made up for by allowing them to turn into their hammocks in the daytime if nothing particular was going on. One never heard a grouse or a grumble, for the men, like their officers, knew quite well that if we did meet the enemy it would be a mere matter of seconds. They were aware that the German destroyers, in their brief sallies to sea, could afford to keep their men constantly on the *qui vive*, with the consequence that they were marvellously quick in getting off their torpedoes. So an instant's

delay on their part might mean the partial disintegration of the ship, and a cold swim for her company with a slight chance of being picked up at the end of it, possibly something worse.

On each destroyer's bridge was a push, the least pressure on which would set the electric alarm gongs clanging throughout the ship and bring the gun's and torpedo tube's crews springing to their feet. At each gun position was a man wearing a canvas helmet fitted with ear-pieces, and a single order down a voice-pipe would be followed by the metallic thump of the breech-blocks as they closed home behind cartridge and projectile.

There was not a glimmer of light visible on board the ships, for the night was sufficiently light to enable each vessel to keep station on her next ahead without the aid of a shaded stern-light. The sea was dimly phosphorescent, breaking into a luminous, steely blue as we drove through it, and looking aft on either quarter, one could see the dark streaks of the swell caused by our passage rolling away toward the horizon. With the mist it was impossible to tell where sea ended and sky began, and occasionally one's fingers hovered instinctively round the push of the alarm gongs, for sometimes the ripples, weird and distorted in the mysterious half-light, looked strangely like the dark shadows of destroyers steaming rapidly on a parallel course. The deception was made all the more realistic by the occasional flutter of white from a breaking swell, suspiciously reminiscent of a

bow wave. It was all a trick of the imagination, but most of us have experienced it.

3

The mist had cleared, but it was still very dark over the sea. Sunrise was not due for another two hours, but away to the eastward, where lay the coast of Holland, a band of citron, broadening and deepening in colour to a dull orange and a pale, translucent vermilion, already showed over the edge of the horizon and lay curled athwart the deep indigo of the lower sky like some gigantic tongue. It was the first sign of the approaching day, but in all other directions the placid ocean was still wrapped in the black mystery of night.

The sub, engaged in some calculation with the chart and tide tables, was murmuring softly to himself within the recesses of the dimly lit chart table. The first lieutenant, pausing every now and then for breath, was gulping a bowl of hot ship's cocoa, while keeping a watchful eye on the next ahead. As for myself, I was sucking the inevitable pipe, with the bowl carefully inverted to keep the sparks from flying. Smoking, I am afraid is a failing of mine, and, as usual after a night of it, the floor of the bridge was well carpeted with my half-burned dottles.

Beneath my feet I could feel the thin steel deck throbbing to the thrust of the turbines, as we drove through the calm water at eighteen knots. The clean, sweet air and the fresh, salty tang of the North Sea was in my very

nostrils, and in spite of my weary, sleepless night, it was very good to be alive. Daybreak on a calm morning at sea, far away from the roar and bustle of cities and the hideous disfigurement of the landscape by the gaunt handiwork of man, has caused better people than myself to thank Heaven for their existence. There is nothing that can quite compare with it.

And the gun's crew on the forecastle, seated round their weapon, had roused themselves from their lethargy, like birds at the first signs of daylight. They were crooning softly, and this morning, for some reason, they had selected the "Yeoman's Wedding Song" and were singing it very well. They had an extensive repertoire, had that gun's crew, due, no doubt, to one of their number having been the leading light of a glee club while he was yet a civilian before the war.

I bent my head forward to listen.

"Ding dong, ding dong, ding dong,
My steed, hie on!
For it is my wedding morning
And the bride———"

came the clear tenor, with the others joining in:—

"Thro' the valley we'll haste,
For we've no time to waste
For 'tis my wedd———"

"Good God! what's that?" a voice suddenly interrupted.

"Guns!" muttered the first lieutenant, pointing to the westward, where, far away on the horizon, sea and sky began suddenly to gleam

and sparkle with tongues and flashes of ruby flame.

"Burrump! Burrump!—Bomp!" came the reports of a salvo, mellowed by the distance into a sound like that of distant, rolling thunder. "Boom!—Boomp!"

I steadied my glasses on the spot. The flashes continued. The roar of the guns became louder and more insistent.

"That's the light cruisers," I heard myself saying. "They're chasing them this way. Stand by, Number One!"

A star shell burst aloft in a dazzling blue-white glare. A searchlight leapt out, swayed once or twice across the water, and then remained steady. It was joined by another, until, looking through glasses, I thought I could see a long silvery shape ripping through the water and all but obliterated in clouds of smoke, a huge arching bow-wave, and the spray plumes of many falling shell. Gouts of crimson and orange flame seemed to be darting in and out in the air above her, but whether or not they were the glare of shell explosions or the ruddy glow from flaming funnels, I could not be certain.

The vessel was a good twelve thousand yards from us, and seemingly about five thousand ahead of the ships whence the gun flashes and searchlights emanated. Without a doubt she was a German destroyer chased by our light cruisers.

The firing died away momentarily, and then broke out with redoubled energy. Another searchlight flickered out, burned for a moment,

and then settled on a spot some distance away from the others and nearer to the pursuers. There was no doubt about it this time, for almost at once we saw the shape of a destroyer turning and twisting in a welter of shell splashes. We saw clouds of dark smoke trailing astern from her funnels, as she vainly endeavoured to conceal herself in a smoke screen—but it was in vain. There came the unmistakable reddish sparkle of exploding shells as they crashed home. Then a great blaze of orange flame rising in a fan-shaped glare out of the sea. It flickered, died down, and vanished, to leave in its place a cloud of thick black smoke, filtering fantastically through the pale brilliance of the searchlight beam.

The booming thud of a heavy detonation came reverberating across the water. It sounded like the explosion of a magazine. Some ship had gone. Pray God it was not one of ours!

The fight, by this time, was within about four miles of us, and we could see with the naked eye a line of three or four destroyers steaming full speed on a south-easterly course, with clouds of black smoke rolling from their funnels as they endeavoured to hide themselves. The shell splashes from the cruisers astern were still darting out of the water all round them, but the shooting was neither so accurate nor so insistent as before. The pursuers were travelling at full speed, for in the gradually increasing light we could see their slim grey shapes with the great V-shaped waves falling away from their sharp bows, and their broad

white wakes stretching out astern—but their quarry obviously had the legs of them.

The moment the firing had started our leader seemed to grasp what was happening, and had at once increased to full speed, turning to a course to cut off the enemy from their base, Zeebrugge. We were now pounding along at over thirty knots with the stokehold fans roaring as they pumped air through the furnaces, but whether or not we should catch them seemed rather doubtful. The three groups of ships, all steaming to the south-eastward, were disposed at the apices of a rough equilateral triangle. The Germans bore about south-east from the cruisers, distant perhaps seven thousand yards and were gradually leaving them astern. From us the enemy bore about south-south-west, the same distance off, and our course, a little to the southward of south-east, was bringing them gradually closer. But at the same time they were drawing slightly across our bows, and it seemed as if they were travelling faster than ourselves. We were already steaming at our utmost speed with the distances between the ships starting to lengthen, and it was obvious that we should have our work cut out to bring them to action.

One's instinctive desire in destroyer fighting is always to close with one's enemy until every shot will tell. A long range action is all very well for big ships armed with heavy guns, but for us, with our comparatively small 4-inch weapons, nothing over about five thousand yards ever seemed really satisfactory. A destroyer travelling at high speed, with her

low hull almost buried in her own wash, is an indifferent target at any time, and though a lucky hit from a big shell may knock her out, it takes a good many projectiles from a 4-inch to stop her. We knew from experience that "in fighting," even though it might result in more damage to ourselves, always paid in the long run. We preferred a range where we could bring our 2-pounder pom-pom into action to pour a hail of small shell on the hostile bridges, for once the nerve centre of a ship is paralysed and her steering gear is damaged, she is generally at the mercy of her opponent. So we obeyed the natural instinct, and, while holding our fire, made every attempt to close.

The light was gradually gathering strength, and the eastern horizon was aglow with the prismatic colouring of the dawn. We, to the eastward, must have been clearly visible to the enemy against the brilliant background, while they, wreathed in their smoke, were dimly silhouetted against the grey horizon to seaward.

The range was gradually decreasing—six thousand five hundred—six thousand. Our leader, realising that the enemy were still drawing slightly ahead, swerved to a roughly parallel course, and almost immediately opened fire. In another moment the whole group of us had joined in, our fire distributed on all the three ships of the enemy's line. We could see the splashes of the first salvos darting out of the water all round them, but on account of their thick smoke, accurate shooting was very difficult. We could only hope for luck.

The enemy could evidently see through their own smoke screen, for suddenly we saw the vivid orange flashes of their guns as they replied. Then a fiendish whinnying and screeching overhead as the shell pitched all round us. I saw one drop a few feet astern of our leader and exactly right for range. Another whizzed over our forecastle and burst harmlessly in the sea a score of yards beyond, while still more fell short and astern of us. Nobody seemed to be hit, but it was a little exasperating. If only that smoke would clear away !

I had had something on my mind ever since the business started, for the enemy, broad on our starboard bow, were in an excellent position for using torpedoes. The Germans evidently came to the same conclusion, for while our guns were still thundering away at each other as fast as they could be loaded and fired, a partial dispersion of the enemy's smoke screen gave us a fleeting glimpse of a series of splashes from their line. They did not look very deadly, and to an untrained observer they would have meant nothing. But we were expecting them, and even now the deadly things were speeding towards us at thirty knots.

Our leader was not long in deciding what to do. A blue, white-spotted pennant fluttered out at his yardarm and was repeated by all ships. It dipped, and immediately our helms went over, and the whole line turned together towards the enemy for perhaps a minute, and then turned back to the original course. What became of the torpedoes I do not know. Probably they sped aimlessly through the place

where we should have been if we had held on, for I was told afterwards that some of our men had seen their whitened tracks in the water far ahead of us. But I never saw them—I was too busy with my own job of looking out for the ship.

Our movement had brought the enemy finer than ever on our bow, so that only our foremost gun could be brought to bear. If we had to alter course again, moreover, there was a chance that the ships astern might be blanketed altogether by the leader. It was unnecessary for him to tell us what to do by signal. We knew from long experience what was required of us, and each ship started to creep out on the quarter of her next ahead.

The range was still about the same—six thousand yards—and we did not seem to be overhauling them appreciably, though the turbines were taking every ounce of steam they could hold.

The firing still continued, but the enemy had evidently got the “wind up,” and were concentrating their efforts on escaping, for their shooting was not very good.

The engagement had now developed into a chase, in which we were the pursuers, for the cruisers were too far astern to render further assistance. In another twenty minutes we should be approaching the minefields off the Scheldt; in half an hour we should be within range of the Knocke battery near Zeebrugge. It was a clear morning, and we knew from experience that the guns on the Belgian coast made pretty good shooting at even 38,000 yards.

We held on, sending message after message below to ginger up the speed ; but we were asking for impossibilities. They were already driving the ship as fast as she could travel, and however impatient we might have been at the time, we knew in our hearts that the excellent fellows in the engine and boiler rooms would never fail us. As it was, they exceeded the contract speed and horse power, but yet we asked for more. It was only natural.

We continued to fire whenever we could—sometimes into the brown of the smoke screen and sometimes at the enemy when the smoke drifted aside and gave us a brief glimpse of them. We could only trust to luck and go on firing, but we had already expended a prodigious amount of ammunition, and I could hear the shouts of the supply parties as they replenished the ammunition at the gun positions.

What we wanted was speed—more speed. I would have bartered a year's pay for another five knots to give us a chance of running down those fleeting grey craft ahead. They always seemed to have the legs of us—a stern chase is ever a long one.

On and on we went, with the great white waves piled up astern of us. The sun was near the horizon and it was practically broad daylight. The low purple streak of Walcheren Island, with its tall lighthouse pointing skywards like a huge finger, was already clearly in sight on our port beam. In another ten minutes or so we should be getting in among the minefields, and would be forced to abandon the pursuit.

The first lieutenant, damning his eyes and everybody else's, was still passing ranges down to the guns and firing whenever he had an opportunity, but to judge from the way the Germans were gradually outpacing us, we might just as well try to stop them with a pea-shooter.

Then, quite suddenly, and when we had given up all hope, it happened. Through the smoke screen about three miles ahead of us I saw the unmistakable reddish glow of fire, and an instant later one of the Germans suddenly shot out of it at right-angles, and lay in full view of us. At first I thought she was contemplating turning right round to attack us. Then I noticed she was badly on fire aft, while her stern was suspiciously low in the water. I put my glasses on her, and could see jagged rents in her funnels and hull, and clouds of steam ascending from her engine room. Her steering gear had evidently been damaged, thus accounting for her swerve out of the line, and as I watched, her speed dwindled to a mere crawl. She had been hit, and hit badly. She was at our mercy. I could have shouted for sheer joy.

But battered and helpless though she was, she would not give in, and as we approached her rapidly she still blazed away with a single gun. I could hear her shell screaming somewhere overhead, but was far too excited to watch where they pitched. Our guns seemed to be making tolerably good practice, for spray plumes shot out of the water all round her, while every now and then I saw the ruddy glow of a bursting shell.

Her friends did not stop to render any assistance. They steamed on under a smoke screen of increasing density, and another few minutes would see them under the protection of their own guns on the Belgian coast. Already we could see land on the horizon immediately ahead of us, with the inevitable kite balloon over Heyst—further pursuit was impossible.

We altered our course to bring our guns to bear, and poured salvo after salvo into the slowly sinking German. She was helpless and stopped, but though we should have preferred to cease firing and approach to rescue her survivors, her solitary gun still spat defiance, and there was no knowing that her torpedoes were not still serviceable.

We reduced speed as we approached, and the signal " Cease firing " fluttered out from the masthead of our leader. The roar of the guns stopped, and then we could see that the enemy was done for. She was on fire forward and aft. Her last gun had been silenced, and her stern was nearly under water.

The end came very quickly. There was a heavy explosion aboard of her, and a column of spray mingled with brown smoke shot up amidships and spread over the water, almost hiding her from view. The survivors had blown her up, sooner than see the wreck fall into our hands. They were brave men.

When the pall cleared away the bows of the stricken ship were standing at an angle of forty-five degrees out of the water, and little else remained but an ever-widening circle of oil, mingled with the hideous litter of floating

wreckage, dotted here and there with the heads of survivors. And as we approached to rescue whom we could, the bows disappeared for ever, and another German destroyer had gone to her fate.

We saved all the men in the water, for all the unwelcome attentions of a covey of enemy seaplanes, who came out from Zeebrugge and dropped their bombs all round us in spite of the fire we opened upon them from our anti-aircraft guns, and then, our work done, scuttled back to the northward, to rejoin the light cruisers.

We should have liked to have bagged all the five Germans, and might have, if we had caught them a little further from their base. As it was, the cruisers had sunk one outright—the one we had seen—and we had “done in” another. The other three retired to their base, and spent the next three weeks or so licking their wounds and reviling the hated English through the medium of their press for deliberately refraining from picking up their drowning flotilla mates.

We had rescued about thirty, all that were in the water when the destroyer sunk. We had done it, moreover, with bombs dropping all round us, so what more they wanted we could not understand.

And the same afternoon we were again playing tennis at the Dovercourt Sports Club. It did not seem at all incongruous.

CHAPTER V

THE MOTHER SHIP

SOMETHING has already been said of the organisation of a destroyer flotilla, but no volume dealing with torpedo-craft would be quite complete without some mention of the depot ships. Theirs are the rather unenviable tasks of keeping their troublesome charges in running order, repairing defects not sufficiently serious to require the attention of a dockyard, keeping the pay accounts of every officer and man in the flotilla, arranging for the issue of clothing, stores, provisions, and mails, caring for the sick, and the performance of the thousand and one odd jobs necessary to the welfare and efficiency of their chickens.

This is what the depot ships exist for, but some, quite apart from their usual function, go out of their way to minister to the comfort and wants of their children. There is nothing in the regulations, for instance, which ordains that a depot ship shall throw open her ward-room mess to the officers of destroyers. Nor is it laid down that she shall organise theatricals,

cinema shows, and concerts for destroyers who are generally too busy to do these things for themselves. But our depot ship at Harwich did all this, and a good deal else besides. It is to be feared that some destroyer folk repaid the motherliness with scant consideration—smoking their pipes in the wardroom when the table was actually laid for meals, and adversely criticising the entertainments. We should have known better; but there was not one of us who did not realise in his heart of hearts how greatly we were indebted to our friend and counsellor.

There are good depot ships and bad ones, some even having an evil reputation which extends far beyond their own flotilla.

“Oh, the ———,” one might hear some destroyer officer say, “One can never get a damned thing out of her!”

Destroyer officers are generally expert in the gentle art of wangling things, so that sometimes a depot ship is not altogether to blame for not seeing eye to eye with a peremptory demand for many fathoms of steel wire hawser or half a dozen teacups to replace those “lost over-board by accident in heavy weather” but the fact remains that if our requests were made in moderation and with due humility we rarely went empty away.

It is the little things that count. Thoughtfulness as to the punctual delivery of mails and fresh provisions to destroyers just in from sea, assistance with boats in stormy weather, all these and other similar little kindnesses help to make life worth living.

Our " mother " at Harwich was the " Dido," an old second class cruiser completed for sea in 1897. She had served on many foreign stations before being converted into a destroyer depot ship before the war. She had shown the flag in the Mediterranean and in China, and had terminated her seagoing career in the Home Fleet. Many thousands of miles of sea water had passed under her bottom before she was relegated to a subsidiary function, though several ships of her class, twenty year old veterans though they were, were still employed as cruisers during the war, though not of course with the Grand Fleet.

The " Dido " had been well known as a smart ship in the heyday of her youth. A good many of us can still remember her " up the Straits* " or in China, with her black hull, polished, it was said, with a mysterious compound of linseed oil and other ingredients known only to her commander; her salmon-pink waterline with its encircling white riband; her immaculate white upperworks, buff-coloured masts and yards, and cream-washed funnels. Next to the " tiddley† " " Hawke," whose heavy davits on the forecastle for catting the anchors were reported to be burnished daily with bath-brick and emery by blasphemous sailors when she was serving in the Mediterranean in 1899, the " Dido " was one of the show ships of the Service. Certainly her smart

* " Up the Straits." On the Mediterranean Station.

† " Tiddley." The sailorese for " smart." The reverse of " chatty," or dirty. The " Hawke " was sunk by a German submarine in the North Sea on October 15th, 1914.

and graceful appearance earned various executive officers their promotion, and caused those of less showy vessels to curse the day of her advent. But all this was under the old "spit and polish" regime, before, if we are to believe an older generation of seamen, the Navy went to the dogs. It was the period when the gun practice was sometimes regarded as a nuisance because it dirtied the surrounding enamel, the time when ramming was still looked upon as a possible means of disposing of an opposing battleship, the age when "repel boarders" was still religiously practised on Friday mornings by fierce-looking marines armed with boarding pikes and tomahawks, the era when gunlayers were enjoined to "accustom themselves to judging ranges at 1,500 yards and over, as they cannot expect to have the ranges constantly passed to them in the heat of an action!" No such thing as a real system of fire control existed.

Fifteen hundred yards! Shades of Drake and Nelson, and only twenty years ago! At the engagement on the Dogger Bank Sir David Beatty opened fire at the retreating enemy at twenty thousand!

Yes. The "Dido" was a smart seagoing cruiser once upon a time, but the fact remains that not the least useful portion of a useful career was spent quietly alongside the quay at Parkeston from 1914 till 1918, when she ministered simultaneously to the wants of anything between twenty and forty destroyers which at one period of the war or another found themselves in the Harwich Force.

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We destroyers suffered from a multitude of ailments, some of our own making and some not. There were collisions of all varieties ; collisions, as someone once put it, of "the first and second magnitudes," the former when portions of the bow still adhered to the hull of the colliding ship, and the latter when the bows were merely undisguisedly crumpled and sorry for themselves. Some came to grief going alongside oilers or jetties, some with their own kith and kin, while one, which shall be nameless, is said to have collided with the end of a pier in a thick fog, greatly to her own surprise and considerably to the alarm of a pierrot troupe who found themselves, their stage, and their auditorium nearly pushed into the sea.

There was action damage, when destroyers limped back into harbour with their hulls, funnels, and upperworks perforated by gunfire. There was torpedo damage, a case in point being the "Mentor," which, in 1915, was torpedoed at night whilst escorting a minelayer off the Horns Reef. She was struck forward, the resulting explosion tearing away the entire bottom of the ship from bridge to stem, while the deck of the forecastle, deprived of all support, sagged languidly downwards until the stem-head was actually in the water. She got home at fourteen knots by some miracle, and, as in many other cases, was put alongside the "Dido" to be made tolerably seaworthy before proceeding to Chatham for docking.

There was mine damage, when craft were

towed into harbour with their sterns missing or their backs broken—but “mother” rendered first aid to them all, consoling them, licking their wounds, patching them up, and sending them off to Chatham for their hurts to be properly attended to.

Stripped turbines, caused by water finding its way through into the turbine-drums with the steam, and shearing the delicately placed blades from their places in the turbine rotor, are a frequent source of trouble in destroyers. The same may be said for “condenseritis”—to use a current navalism—when the tubes of the condensers leak and salt water percolates through into the boilers, greatly to their detriment. Many craft found themselves alongside the depot ship suffering from these complaints, but the most cursory glance at the maze of machinery crammed into a destroyer’s engine-room, all of which might go wrong, but rarely does, causes one to marvel that we were not laid up more often than we were.

Some destroyers run like clockwork, while others have engine or boiler trouble from the day of their birth. Our chief infantile complaint was our stern glands, the watertight joints in the hull through which the propeller shafts pass through to the outside of the ship.

For the first six months or so of our commission it never seemed possible to get them exactly right. If adjusted one way they ran hot, due to the friction of the propeller shaft as it revolved; if adjusted the other ways the water poured in and the stern-gland compartment became flooded every time we put

to sea. Either alternative was equally undesirable, and the engineer officer was reduced to a state of vituperant incoherency.

The engineering experts of the depot ship were summoned to our assistance and tried their hands at it, and after a good deal of work patted us gently but firmly on the back, told us that everything was "all right now," and suggested our going to sea to test their handiwork. We did so, but were back within the hour with the stern-gland compartment flooded.

They scratched their heads and tried again, while the "Chief*" smiled in his boots and maintained a discreet silence. We made another attempt, only to return with another tale of woe—they promptly sent us to Chatham dockyard.

The dockyard experts, boarding us on arrival, examined the defect, assumed an air of calm superiority, and were obviously sceptical as to our bona-fides.

"D'you mean to tell me a little job like this can't be done by your own depot ship?" I was asked.

The answer was in the affirmative.

They regarded us with suspicion, but putting their heads together eventually agreed to finish the job within the week.

They remedied the thing eventually, though, if my memory is not at fault, it took them the better part of five weeks, during which we carried out no less than three steam trials, always with the same abortive result.

So even the dockyard experts scratched

* The "Chief." That is the engineer officer.

their heads and were forced to confess that our ship was far more difficult a patient than any other destroyer they had doctored. They consumed a considerable amount of liquid nourishment at our expense whilst coming to this conclusion ; but even so they did not love us a little bit, whereat the " Chief " and I winked at each other behind their backs and felt inclined to say " I told you so."

Every two months or so we found ourselves alongside the jetty or the " Dido " for our periodical " boiler cleaning," when we let fires die out, and, with the ship at eight hours notice for steam, the depot ship's boiler party, assisted by our own men, scaled the deposit from the insides of the boiler tubes. The work took about four days, and the period of comparative quiescence also gave us a chance of painting the ship, and, with the aid of the " Dido's " carpenters, plumbers, blacksmiths, shipwrights, and artisans, of carrying out what refitting work was necessary.

At these times our leave was more generous than usual, for besides giving the men more leisure ashore and an opportunity of visiting the wet canteen in a shed on Parkeston Quay—another of the " Dido's " institutions highly popular with our ship's companies—the officers could dine ashore and go as far as Ipswich to " get their hair cut," provided always that they remained at the end of a telephone. The lack of skilful barbers in Harwich was notorious.

The boiler cleaning thus came as a rest, but even so there was always the annoying feeling that we might miss some good " stunt "

through being out of action, though as often as not, when something particularly urgent did take place, even the "boiler cleaners" were ordered to raise steam and put to sea.

I still have a vivid recollection of the sudden arrival of orders in the middle of one night, when our boilers were opened up, portions of our machinery were lying on the upper deck or were away for repair in the workshops ashore, our boats had been landed for repairs, the ship was covered in wet paint, and the upper deck littered with a veritable hotch-potch of miscellaneous stores.

"Raise steam with all despatch and report when ready to proceed," burst upon us like a bombshell.

It was raining hard and blowing half a gale of wind, but orders were orders, and turning the men out of their hammocks we procured the missing portions of our engines, closed down the boilers, bundled the stores below, slammed things together as fast as we could, raised steam, and, in the cold grey light of the morning, backed cautiously out from the tangle of craft lying alongside the jetty and reported "Ready to proceed."

It had taken us about four hours from start to finish, which was good going, and for over an hour we lay at a buoy momentarily expecting the signal to slip and proceed to sea. But when the signal did come it was "Revert to usual notice for steam!" It was a false alarm. We had had all our trouble for nothing.

The chief grew purple in the face and full of righteous indignation. The first lieutenant,

thinking of his ruined paintwork, became fervid in his language and harried the ordinary seamen, while the sub vented his spleen on the signalmen for upsetting a bottle of red ink in the chart house. The feeling of wrath percolated throughout the ship, for while the coxswain anathematised the lamp-trimmer, the chief stoker informed the storekeeper that he would "have his liver as a necktie," which was most impolite of him. As for myself, I hadn't a good word for anybody.

The prospect of a "stunt" had kept us all cheerful, but it was early in the morning, and the moment it became a "dud stunt" there was hair flying all round. It was not until "mother" made us a signal "Come alongside and resume boiler cleaning" that things seemed to run smoothly again. By ten o'clock, when we were once more alongside the jetty and the first lieutenant returned from a piratical expedition with the cheering news that he had "wangled" a fresh consignment of paint, together with three gallons of white enamel which he had no right to, the world seemed quite a good place to live in.

Air-raids on Harwich were by no means unusual, and during the height of the Zeppelin season our nights were frequently interrupted. That their efforts were not more successful can only be attributed to sheer good luck, for besides dropping bombs on the town of Harwich itself, they made a dead set at Parkes-ton Quay.

It certainly provided a satisfactory target, for besides the "Dido," the submarine depot

ships " Maidstone," " Forth," and " Pandora " were also moored alongside, as well as any number of submarines, destroyers, and small craft. The Great Eastern Railway Company's hotel, on the shore side of the Quay, was well populated with officers' wives, while the various sheds and warehouses had been adapted to the needs of the time and provided accommodation for the large number of extra ratings belonging to the submarine and destroyer establishments. Pay and mail offices, workshops, and storehouses were scattered here and there wherever room could be found for them.

The quay and its buildings were built mostly of wood, in addition to which spare torpedoes and a considerable quantity of ammunition, depth charges, war-heads for torpedoes, and other explosives were kept in store in the vicinity. So if a Zeppelin bomb had fallen there, there would have been a finer display of fireworks than was ever produced by Messrs. Payne or Brock.

But though there were several narrow escapes the quay itself was never once struck, though well I remember the night when a Zeppelin dropped bombs in Parkeston village and the surrounding fields, missed out the quay itself, and deposited the rest of her noisome cargo in the narrow harbour, barely missing a destroyer lying alongside an oiler. The omission of the quay might almost have been done by design, for when we saw the bomb-craters the next day, we found them spaced at equal intervals of about four hundred yards, with the nearest a bare two hundred from the jetty.

In the same raid Parkeston village suffered severely, but it was only by a miracle that there was not a more terrible disaster.

To revert to more savory topics.

Those of us who served in the destroyers at Harwich will never forget the periodical evening entertainments held in the temporary theatre erected at one end of the shed which also contained the wet canteen. The scenery was truly terrific, and so also were some of the local turns, but we sat as tight as sardines, and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves; we, and our wives, and our friends—captains, commanders, lieutenant-commanders, lieutenants, subs, doctors, paymasters, everybody; sometimes even the commodore himself. The air became blue with tobacco smoke. The sailors behind shouted each chorus and cat-called their favourite performers, and everything was very cheerful and gay.

Shall we forget the "Endell Street Follies," or the inimitable Miss Norah Blaney sitting at the piano and ogling the blushing Royal Marine who acted as the conductor of the "Dido's" orchestra as she sang "If I were the only girl in the world, and you were the only boy?"

I think not.

Shall we forget that versatile engineer officer whose name is Gaud, and who would make far more money on the music hall stage as a second Corney Grain than ever he is likely to do in the Service?

Echo answers "No."

And the refreshments in the "Dido's"

crowded wardroom afterwards, when we struggled for the final sardine sandwich for our womenfolk, and the last cup of coffee. It is all very pleasant to look back upon. It all helped to inculcate the "band of brothers" feeling.

There was once a destroyer who was very unkind to her depot ship, though the incident did not take place in our part of the world.

Depot ships do not spend much time at sea, and it came to pass after lying at her moorings for nearly a year without moving, that "mother" was required to shift to a more salubrious anchorage, which involved steaming down stream past the line of destroyers lying at their buoys, circling round, and coming up on the other side. And it so happened that one of the destroyers possessed a band, a party of amateur performers more renowned for their noisiness than their strict adherence to tune.

And as the depot ship passed slowly by on the outward journey the band mustered on deck and played "A life on the ocean wave," while, when she returned a quarter of an hour later, she was saluted with "Rolling home to merrie England!"

There was a severe frost the same evening. It lasted for some days. I wonder what our kind "mother" would have said if we had treated her thus.

Shall we destroyers who were at Harwich forget the good old "Dido?"

The answer, I think, is in the negative.

CHAPTER VI

THE TONDERN AIR RAID, 1916

I

EXCEPT for the ships of our own squadron and the squat red shape of a lightship showing over the horizon to the eastward, the grey-blue sea was barren. We were well over towards the Danish coast, and the light-vessel, with its two masts, its thick yellow funnel and its scarlet hull bearing the white cross of Denmark and "Horns Rev" in conspicuous black lettering, still formed a milestone in many of our expeditions. It was before the days when the Danish authorities, unwilling to run the risk of being accused of unneutral service to one or other of the belligerents, removed certain of their offshore light-vessels and replaced them by buoys. The time had not yet come when the outer fringe of the Heligoland Bight was unsafe on account of British minefields designed to entrap hostile submarines and to hamper the High Sea Fleet if it put to sea, while enemy minefields laid to limit the activity of our Fleet had not as yet been extensively utilised. There were certain dangerous areas enclosed by red lines on the

chart which we were cautioned not to enter unless in pursuit of the enemy, but otherwise British squadrons were still more or less free to come and go as they pleased.

On this occasion, with four light-cruisers, a seaplane carrier, and a number of destroyers, we were going in with the idea of sending seaplanes to attack the hostile Zeppelin sheds at Hoyer, on the mainland of Schleswig opposite the island of Sylt. The Zeppelin season was at its height. Their bombing raids on England were becoming more and more frequent, and if some of the monsters could be destroyed in their lairs, so much the better.

It was one of those very cold frosty mornings, with a hard blue sky piled up with masses of greyish cloud. The breeze, which chilled one through to the very marrow, was just sufficient to ruffle the water, and throughout the early morning we had passed through occasional areas of falling snow so dense that the visibility was reduced to a bare quarter of a mile. But the snow was only intermittent, and though a falling glass and the threatening appearance of the western sky foretold a change in the weather later on in the day, the conditions were generally favourable for our enterprise.

Having reached the Horns Reef light-vessel, we swung round towards the Vyl lightship, eighteen miles to the south-eastward, and an hour later, having passed through a group of brown-sailed Danish fishing-craft, the operation started. The seaplane-carrier stopped and hoisted out her five machines, while destroyers circled round, lest there should be a submarine

lurking in the vicinity. And one by one, after skimming along the calm water in showers of spray, the seaplanes, with their engines roaring, rose into the air and disappeared to the south-east towards their objective, climbing as they went. They had little over sixty miles to travel, thirty there and thirty back, so their task, if all went well, should take between an hour and an hour and a half. On their return they would be hoisted in by their parent-ship, and the whole force would retire to the eastward at high speed, *en route* for home.

We spent the time steaming to and fro on a zig-zag course, keeping a good look-out for hostile aircraft which, stirred up by our bombers, must inevitably make their appearance sooner or later. Sixty minutes passed—an hour and a quarter—and then, in the midst of a blinding snow flurry, two of the machines made their appearance, alighted on the water, and were hoisted in their by parent.

Of their success or otherwise we heard nothing at the time, and it was not until some days later that news filtered through that their expedition had been abortive. Apparently thick snow clouds had lain very low over the land, so that they had great difficulty in finding the Zeppelin sheds at all. One machine, however, flying very low, had sighted them, and, fired upon by every anti-aircraft gun that the enemy could bring to bear, had succeeded in reaching a position barely 400 feet over her huge target. She then attempted to drop her bombs, but the releasing gear, clogged with ice and frozen snow, failed to act. Circling

round, with shell bursting all round him and bullets whistling by, the pilot made another attempt. His gallantry was unavailing. The release gear again refused to act, and reviling the bitter fate which had robbed him of the chance of making the most of a glorious opportunity, he had no alternative but to return.

Of the other machines there was no trace. The time drew on. For another half hour we waited for their return with what patience we could muster, and then were forced to the conclusion that something untoward had taken place. But there was still a remote chance that the missing seaplanes, either winged or through engine trouble, might have been forced to come down in the sea between us and their objective, and accordingly a couple of flotilla leaders and eight destroyers—of which we were one—were ordered to form into a line abreast and to sweep down the coast towards Sylt, in the hope of rescuing the pilots and, if possible, recovering the 'planes.

We sped off at twenty knots, and for half an hour steamed on a south-easterly course, until at last we could see the low yellow sandhills of Sylt and the roofs and towers of its villages showing well up over the horizon ahead. The water shoaled gradually as we advanced, and presently we were over the Rote Kiff sand, with little more than six feet of water under our propellers. We could feel the ship dragging as her speed was suddenly checked. The bow rose until the forefoot was nearly out of water and the stern fell, while following us came an

enormous stern wave, with its creamy summit towering high over the quarterdeck.

Eventually we arrived within about five miles of the island. We seemed very close, someone even remarking that he could read the time by the town-hall clock. It was an exaggeration, but even so, I could not help remembering that a range of ten thousand yards is a mere nothing for modern coast artillery, while I had a dim suspicion at the back of my mind that I had read somewhere or other that the island was heavily fortified. I remember looking at the coast through my glasses, waiting anxiously for the first orange flash among the sand dunes, the scream of a shell as it drove overhead, and a white pillar of spray as it toppled into the water and exploded. But if there were any guns mounted on Sylt, they were never used against us.

We approached as close as we dared, and then, as the weather was quite clear and there were still no signs of the missing seaplanes, the whole line of two flotilla leaders and eight destroyers altered course eight points—90 degrees—to starboard, with the idea of returning to the cruisers, now out of sight to the north-westward.

The horizon to seaward was cloudy, and it was just after our right-angled turn to the south-west that, slightly on our starboard bow at a range of almost eight thousand yards, we suddenly saw two grey-painted vessels steaming across our bows towards the coast. By this time we were in a long single line with considerable intervals between the

units. To seaward came the destroyer "Morris," next the "Mansfield," and then our own ship, followed, in the order named, by the "Medusa" the flotilla leader "Nimrod," and a division of four "L" class destroyers with the "Laverock" leading. The "Lightfoot," flotilla leader, brought up the rear.

The two craft we had sighted seemed to be of the trawler type. They could only be German minesweepers or patrol craft returning to their base at Lister Deep, and swinging slightly to port to head them off, the "Morris," "Mansfield," and ourselves increased speed to twenty-five knots, with officers and men at their action stations.

"Poor little devils!" I remember observing to the sub-lieutenant. "They don't stand a dog's chance. I hope to heaven they'll surrender."

It was mere baby killing, and it rather went against the grain to open fire with our 4-inch guns on two small craft which could muster no more than perhaps a couple of 3-pounders between them. I, for one, would have preferred a bloodless surrender, but it was not to be.

We were closing them fast, and at a distance of about five thousand yards we saw an orange flash, and heard the snarl of the report as the "Mansfield" fired the first shot. The shell, deliberately aimed, pitched into the water about a cable ahead of the Germans, who by this time were in line abreast about half a mile apart. It was a hint to them to avoid useless bloodshed by stopping and hauling down their colours, for they were up against hopeless odds.

But to the everlasting glory of the men who manned those little craft—I say it advisedly, enemies though they were—they had made up their minds to fight, for there suddenly came a sparkle of flame from the nearer vessel as the gun in her bows was fired towards us. The tiny shell pitched into the water a few hundred yards short and burst in an insignificant puff of black smoke, and at the same we received a message from our telegraphist to say that both craft were using their wireless to report our presence. Their signals were being answered by the unmistakable Telefunken of the German stations ashore.

We had them absolutely at our mercy, but hopeless though their situation was, they preferred to do their duty rather than to surrender. It was gallant of them ; proof positive that in those days the canker of indiscipline had not as yet poisoned the moral of the Imperial German Navy. Another flash from the enemy, and this time the puny projectile fell closer.

The challenge was almost immediately followed by the sparkle of the “Mansfield’s” guns as she fired the first salvo in earnest.

“Open fire,” I said to the control officer.

He passed an order down a voice-pipe. A bell rang, and with a crash and a jar our guns went off. For a moment we were enveloped in a warm, acrid cloud of tawny cordite smoke, but it cleared away in time to enable us to see three dazzling plumes of spray rise out of the water close to the target.

“Up four hundred—Fire!” went another order.

Another jarring thud, and this time only two spray fountains shot out of the sea. The third round was a hit, for I saw a gout of crimson flame and a puff of thick yellow-black smoke at the base of the trawlers' funnel, as the shell drove home and burst.

The splashes leapt out of the sea all round her, and the unhappy victim, as if suddenly realising the utter hopelessness of her position, ignited a smoke box and enveloped herself in a pall of greyish vapour which completely blotted out her hull. We continued to fire into the thick of it.

Within a few minutes we had approached within a thousand yards, and as both trawlers had been hit repeatedly and had stopped, our guns ceased firing. The "Morris" and "Mansfield," meanwhile, had been engaging first the nearer and then the further vessel, and I noticed the crew of the latter abandoning their ship in their small boat. A moment or two later their vessel flung her bows in the air and slowly sank, stern first.

The nearer craft, the "Otto Rudolf," all but invisible in her own smoke cloud, was still afloat, and steaming across her bows, we circled round to get a clearer view from windward, with our guns still trained upon her. But the ensign had already disappeared from her mizen, and in its place they had hoisted a white shirt as a signal of surrender. The vessel, hit in the engine-room, was vomiting clouds of steam, while tongues of flame were licking about her upper works, and her funnel, wheel house and forecastle were all shot through and through

Clustered amidships was a pitiful little group of survivors with their hands uplifted.

"Kamerad!" they shouted. "Do not shoot!"

We had no intention of doing so, provided there was no treachery, and steaming up within a hundred yards, lowered a boat and sent her across to rescue the survivors and to help them with their wounded. It was while this work was in progress that some ship at the other end of our line, unaware that the trawler had surrendered, and not seeing us in the pall of grey smoke drifting to leeward, opened fire. We had drifted to within fifty yards of the "Otto Rudolf" when the shell pitched, and, unpleasant as it was, I am forced to admit that the shooting was very good. Two shells actually splashed into the sea between the trawler and ourselves. The third whizzed eerily over the quarterdeck and struck about ten yards beyond. It was a nasty moment, but luckily the smoke drifted clear at a most opportune time, and revealed us to our would-be antagonist. I can only hope that whoever was responsible for the incident was subsequently smitten by the qualms of his own conscience, for the shell which passed over missed a group of men by mere feet. When we recounted the incident on our arrival in harbour, our harrowing tale was received with shrieks of derisive merriment.

With a megaphone to my lips I was hailing a boat to be as quick as possible, when I heard a sudden exclamation from the sub.

"My God, she's into her!"

I looked round at once to see, about half

a mile dead ahead of us, two of our destroyers still tearing along at something over twenty knots and meeting nearly at right angles. Before I could draw another breath the worst had happened, for there came the dull, rending crash of the collision, as the "Medusa" was struck amidships. She heeled bodily over with the force of the blow until the water came pouring over the lee side of her upper deck. Then, with a shrill tearing of tortured steel, the two craft slid free, and we could see a great gash in the stricken vessel's side reaching from deck to water-line.

It was another horrible moment, for even if the "Medusa" did not sink as a result of her injury, she would probably have to be towed. The glass had started to drop fast. It was between eight and nine o'clock in the morning, and with most of the day still before us it was not very pleasant to find ourselves with a stricken consort a few miles off the German coast and several hostile bases within a couple of hours' steaming. The chances were fully a hundred to one that the enemy would become aware of our predicament and enliven matters by harrying our retreat.

The ramming destroyer, though her bows were badly strained and crumpled, was still able to steam at moderate speed, and was presently sent off to rejoin the cruisers to the northward. The "Medusa" meanwhile, having placed a collision mat over the hole, started her pumps, and soon reported that she could probably remain afloat. Her motive power, however, had gone, as the engine and

after boiler-rooms were flooded, and as she was quite helpless one of the flotilla leaders closed and made preparations for taking her in tow.

One whaler, full of men, came pulling slowly back towards the ship, and as she left the sinking "Otto Rudolf," we saw the surviving Germans leap to their feet, wave their caps, and give their usual three abrupt "Hourras!" for their vessel. Within a few minutes the boat was alongside and the prisoners were being helped on board and an armed guard took charge of them. Out of a total of twenty-two souls originally on board the trawler we rescued one officer and twelve men, one of whom was seriously and another slightly wounded. The remainder had been killed.

It was rather touching to see the way our men treated their late enemies. In spite of the previous bloodthirsty threats as to what they would like to do to any Germans who fell into their hands, now that the time had come their better feelings overcame them, and they did all in their power to lighten their unhappy lot. It was impossible not to feel sympathetic for the poor shell-dazed creatures who had escaped death by a miracle, and though a certain restraint, mingled with a good deal of curiosity, was evident in our men's demeanour, they treated their prisoners with consideration, even went out of their way to make them comfortable. What seemed to surprise our ship's company most was that the Germans, though they spoke a different language, were men not unlike themselves, not the wild barbarians they had expected.

If they had been the survivors of a submarine caught in the act of sinking a passenger vessel with women on board, their treatment might have been different, but though it is very easy to show no mercy to one's enemies when one's blood is up and there is incontestable proof that they have committed the most unspeakable outrages, cold-blooded cruelty to ordinary prisoners is not a British characteristic.

We fired half-a-dozen more shells into the " Otto Rudolf," to hasten her end, and watched her heel over, tilt her bows skywards, and sink with a gurgling sound of escaping air. The sea closed over her, and nothing remained but a patch of discoloured water streaked with oil and littered with flotsam.

Then another and more pressing matter claimed our attention, for suddenly a column of spray leapt out of the water close alongside the " Medusa," and we heard the thump of an explosion. Another, another, and yet a fourth.

At first we imagined that the guns of Sylt had opened fire on our ships as they all lay bunched up together within easy range, for those spouting geysers in the sea looked remarkably like falling shell. We were soon disillusioned, however, for, glancing over-head from sheer force of habit, we presently discerned the slender shape of an aeroplane against the clear blue sky immediately above us. The machine, flying at a height of about 10,000 feet, with the sun glinting on the dead white under-surface of her wings, seemed absurdly remote and ethereal, but it was she who was responsible for those upheavals in

the water, and presently a bomb might get home with unpleasant results.

More aeroplanes appeared from nowhere in particular, until we could count as many as ten in the air at the same moment. More bombs came whistling from the heavens with an eerie screeching, to burst noisily as they fell. Things were getting warm, and amidst the staccato "poom-poom-poom" of our 2-pounder anti-aircraft guns as they opened fire, all craft except the "Medusa" and the ship about to take her in tow circled and zig-zagged to and fro, to put the enemy off their aim.

The heavens became pock-marked with puffs of smoke from bursting projectiles, some intensely white, some purple, some black, and some a vivid golden-brown; but though our little guns were bursting their shells at extreme height, they did not seem to have much effect. The aeroplanes were very persistent in their efforts, and, having dropped one cargo of beastliness, hurried home to their aerodrome, ten miles away, to procure a fresh consignment. One machine, which we recognised by the peculiar marking of her wings, visited us no less than three times.

None of the bombs actually hit, though there were many narrow shaves. Several craft were closely "straddled," bombs of the same salvo falling on either side of them within a short distance, while another was missed by no more than ten feet, every soul in the vicinity being wetted to the skin by the consequent water-spout.

The enemy wireless, meanwhile, which had

been rising in a gradual crescendo, had now, according to our telegraphist, reached its fortissimo stage. The aeroplanes, ships at Heligoland Cuxhaven, and Emden, besides shore stations, had all joined in the conversation, and there was no shadow of doubt whatever that the Bosche knew exactly what had happened, and that he would make strenuous efforts to cut us off on the return journey, now that we had a lame duck to delay us. We looked anxiously towards the southern skyline, expecting every moment to see the shapes of light cruisers emerging over the horizon, but nothing came.

At last, after what seemed an eternity, the "Medusa" was in tow, and with the rest of us spread out to ward off hostile submarines, we steamed to the northward at ten knots, the maximum speed at which the damaged vessel could be dragged along. And in due course we joined the cruisers and made tracks towards home, but until two o'clock in the afternoon the enemy aircraft still kept us under observation, while we enlivened the monotony by firing whenever they ventured too close. Their persistence in dogging our footsteps was a little trying.

Seized with curiosity, I went to the chart-house and rapped on the little window giving access to the wireless office.

"Anything very much going on?" I asked, when the window flew open and the operator's head appeared.

He grinned.

"Going on, sir? I should think there was.

Every time we alter our course or do anything, the aeroplanes start buzzing like bluebottles. You can hear 'em being answered too--listen, sir."

He unclipped the receivers from his head and handed them across. I put them on, still warm from the contact with his ears, to hear a musical throbbing sound in the regular longs and shorts of morse. Then a pause, followed by the harsh, discordant screeching of Telefunken from somewhere over the rim of the horizon.

"They seem pretty busy," I observed.

"They are that, sir," he agreed with enthusiasm.

Every man to his trade. The telegraphist was too interested in listening to unintelligible snatches of German conversations to worry about other things.

As for myself, I could not help feeling vaguely perturbed.

2

Soon after six o'clock the sun was nearing the horizon in a glare of sulphurous yellow overshot with sickly green. Dense cloud masses, purple and crimson, were slowly banking up on the western skyline, while the wind, which had been veering throughout the day, was now blowing from the W.S.W. with ever-increasing force. The ocean had lost its glassy sheen, and had assumed a dull bluish-purple. The sea had started to rise, and though as yet the waves were not breaking, the steep hummocks rapidly grew more threatening.

The glass had fallen, but we did not need its dismally low reading to tell us what to

expect. The appearance of sky and sea were quite sufficient to give warning of a gale in our teeth for the homeward hourney, and we were not disappointed.

At about 5.15 we sighted the upper works of a line of great ships looming up over the horizon to the westward, and clearly silhouetted against the garish yellow background. They were zig-zagging in their course with great streamers of smoke trailing out astern of them, and while they were yet hull down over the horizon, they seemed strangely unfamiliar and foreign. For a few breathless moments we imagined that they were German battle-cruisers between us and home, but presently, when they swung towards us and their hulls lifted into view, we recognised them as our own battle cruiser squadron, with Sir David Beatty, in the "Lion," at their head.

The sight of these huge ships, of whose presence we had hitherto been unaware, was a blessed relief to our anxiety, and when, a few moments later, the "Lion's" searchlight started winking, and spelt out a message to our commodore, we could have shouted for joy.

"I shall be close to you during the night," said Sir David, if I remember rightly. "If you want me give me a shout."

I have since become aware that a considerable force of German cruisers and destroyers had put to sea to cut us off. We, the smaller fry, did not know this at the time, but possibly our leader did.

There was a large rectangular area marked

in red on our charts, which was dangerous on account of German mines. At a rough guess I should say it covered a space of 60 miles by 40, the longer sides lying approximately north and south. There were two alternative routes open to us ; first, the shorter and most obvious track to the west along the southern edge of the dangerous area, and second, the longer journey to the northward up the eastern limit of the minefield for 60 miles, and then to the westward along its northern side.

The night came down dark, with a heavy tumbling sea, and soon afterwards we altered course to the northward which brought the sea on the quarter and caused us to roll as only destroyers can. The "Medusa" was still being tugged along astern of her towing ship, but as the light faded and we saw the last of her, she seemed to be making very heavy weather of it. She carried a heavy list to starboard ; seas were breaking over her deck, and at one moment the towing wire sagged under water, while the next it tautened in the air like a harp-string.

The object of our detour to the northward was fairly obvious. The enemy, knowing that we had a lame duck, would naturally imagine that we should select the shortest route home, and would probably send the bulk of his force direct to the westward to intercept us, which I believe was what he did.

By 9.30 we were steaming at a bare 8 knots, the greatest speed at which the "Medusa" could be towed. Rain squalls driving down from windward accentuated the unpleasantness,

and a quarter of an hour later, by which time the sea was really bad, the towing wire parted and the damaged destroyer was left drifting like a helpless log in the trough of the waves.

An attempt was made to take her in tow again, but as the sea was running too high for boat work, and she was reported to be sinking, orders were given for the unfortunate craft to be abandoned and sunk. The question that now arose was how her officers and men should be saved.

The difficulty was solved by the "Lassoo," commanded by Lieutenant-Commander Vernon Butler. He at first attempted to take his destroyer alongside the wreck, but the wild movement of both vessels made it impossible without running a grave risk of crushing in the "Lassoo's" side and otherwise seriously damaging her. But the lieutenant-commander was not to be daunted by a difficulty of that kind. He thought of another alternative, and turning his ship, placed his bows neatly against the "Medusa's" forecastle, and kept them there by steaming gently ahead. It required great skill and judgment, for the two ships, rising and falling in the waves, ground terribly together, but one by one the "Medusa's" men started to jump across to their rescuer. Owing to the danger of being carried broadside on to the wreck, Lieutenant-Commander Butler had to make two or three attempts before he finally rescued the entire ship's company, but save them he did. One man fell into the water and was rescued, but except for this and a gash bitten out of the

"Lassoo's" stem well above the water line, which she wore as a badge of honour until her next visit to a dockyard, there was no damage of any kind.

One hears little of these incidents in the ordinary course of events. Decorations and honours are not granted for displays of seamanship which may sometimes be the means of saving many lives. The Navy sets a high standard for its awards, and affairs of the sort described are regarded in the light of ordinary occurrences, and we would not have it otherwise. A specially meritorious incident may be recognised by the arrival of a typewritten letter from the Admiralty wherein a senior officer is directed to "convey an expression of their Lordships' appreciation" to Lieutenant X or Lieutenant-Commander T. "for his conduct on the occasion of. . . ." There the matter ends, though I believe it to be a fact that their Lordships' "appreciation" is noted in the big Black Book, or one of them, wherein are entered the good and wicked deeds of all the officers in His Majesty's Navy.

But the fact remains that the "Lassoo" was responsible for a remarkably fine bit of work, and it is to be regretted that not so very long afterwards she herself was blown up by an enemy mine in the vicinity of the Noord Hinder light-vessel. Her commanding officer was among the survivors.

At about 10.30, when we were still circling round while the work of rescue was in progress, we saw the ruby flashes of sudden gunfire from the darkness away to the eastward, in

which direction were our light cruisers, headed by Commodore Tyrwhitt with his broad pennant in the "Cleopatra." The sound of the reports came booming across the intervening water—then dead silence, save for the thunder of the breaking seas.

It was not until we returned into harbour that we heard that the "Cleopatra" had sighted two hostile destroyers crossing her bows from port to starboard at high speed. The "Undaunted," the second light cruiser in the line, saw them at the same moment, and opened fire, while the "Cleopatra," putting her helm over, swung round and rammed the second German amidships.

It was all over in an instant. The sharp bows of the cruiser struck her antagonist almost at right-angles, and tore their way through her thin plating as if it were brown paper. The unhappy craft was cut in two, the stern sinking alongside, while the bow portion, with the piercing screams of the Germans echoing through the night, sped on, to lose its impetus and to sink in the wild turmoil of the sea. There were no survivors.

Many of the "Cleopatra" wives were afterwards presented with mementoes of the occasion in the shape of bracelets made of the German's wireless aerial, which, stretched between her masts, came tumbling down on the cruiser's forecastle when the collision occurred.

It was during the sudden alteration of course that two of the cruisers came into collision. As I was not present on the spot I have no knowledge how it occurred, but the "Un-

daunted" was very seriously damaged. Indeed, judging from the wireless signals which we intercepted the next day, by which time it was blowing the North Sea equivalent for a hurricane, with a very heavy sea, it seemed possible that she was on the verge of sinking and would have to be abandoned. Her commanding officer, however, Captain F. G. St. John, was not the man to give up hope while there was the least chance of saving his ship. He continued to struggle to the westward in the teeth of the worst gale I think I have ever experienced, and, making good about three knots, eventually succeeded in making the Tyne, where his ship was repaired.

To revert to our own doings.

Once free of the "Medusa," we destroyers steamed to the northward at fifteen knots, rolling and wallowing horribly in the tumultuous sea. Provided we had it behind us things were not as bad as they might be, but early the next morning when we turned to the westward somewhere in the latitude of the Firth of Forth and brought it on our port bow, we found we could steam no more than ten knots against it. Even so the bows were pitching clear of the water at one moment and buried themselves the next, while the upper deck was constantly swept fore and aft by the huge, yeasty-topped combers. And as we crawled along, things grew worse, for the sea grew bigger, and the bumping, crashing and thudding became positively dangerous and threatened to strain the ship if we persisted in forcing her. Moreover, there was always

the danger of a rivet being knocked out of the foremost oil tanks as the bows fell into a hollow. We had none too much fuel for the return journey as it was, and if once we got water in amongst the fuel we should be in a very precarious predicament. We accordingly eased to eight knots which, although it did nothing to lessen the maddening pitching and rolling, certainly helped the ship to ride easier.

The distances on the sodden chart seemed to have become magnified out of all proportion. When we turned the corner, and started to steam to the westward, we had perhaps 250 miles to travel before we could expect the comparative shelter of the coast, and here we were pounding along at eight knots and making good about five. It was a very dismal procession, and I, for one, was glad that there were other destroyers with us. Their presence seemed somehow to alleviate the monotony. Companions in one's unhappiness are ever some consolation.

Our surgeon-probationer had been up most of the night with the seriously wounded German whom we had rescued from the "Otto Rudolf." Ever since he had been on board the poor wretch had been in a very bad way, for he had been hit in the back, and three or four shell splinters were still inside him. He had uttered no sound beyond an occasional low moan, but as he was obviously in great pain and an operation was absolutely out of the question, there was nothing for the doctor to do but to keep the poor fellow con-

tinuously under morphia to alleviate his agony. Indeed, the day previous, soon after we had rescued them, some slight peevishness had been caused in medical circles by the wounded man's companions religiously swabbing his head with cold water to bring him to.

If we had had fine weather on the homeward journey his life might have been saved, but as it was, and in spite of the unremitting attention of the doctor, the terrible movement of the ship hastened the end, and he died soon after daylight the day after he had been brought on board.

A funeral at sea is always an affecting sight, but this particular one, an enemy's though it was, will always remain stamped in my memory. The ship was rolling and pitching violently as the grey whitecaps came foaming past, and as I read the usual prayers, I had to hold on with one hand to retain my footing. The German officer then said a few words to his men, and the canvas-shrouded form, with a shot at its feet, was allowed to slide overboard as an enormous sea came thundering over the forecastle. It was all over.

For the whole of that day and the ensuing night we battled slowly to the westward, and it was not until the next day that we began to feel the lee of the land and were able to increase speed. We finally arrived at Harwich late the same afternoon with ten tons of oil fuel left in our tanks, and seldom have I been more glad to arrive in harbour.

3

The prisoners, to give them their due, were a remarkably fine-looking lot of men, for the time had not yet come when the German naval discipline had gone and the sweepings of the service were sent to the auxiliary patrol craft. The men were mostly reserve men with a sprinkling of proper naval ratings, and it was noticeable that more than half of them could make themselves understood in our language.

Our ship's company treated them very kindly, and in course of conversation discovered a good deal as to what they thought of the war. It was admittedly unpopular, more particularly on account of the British blockade and the consequent shortage of food for the civil population. But they one and all repudiated the fact that Germany was responsible, and would have it that British aspirations and aggressions were the cause of the conflict. When asked about the violation of Belgium by German troops they shrugged their shoulders and passed it off as a mere side issue. It had nothing whatever to do with Great Britain; in fact, it was rather unfair of Great Britain to join in a quarrel of theirs with France and Russia. As for the eventual outcome of the war they had no doubts whatsoever. The submarine campaign would wipe the British mercantile marine off the face of the seas, and before long Verdun would fall and open the gateway for a victorious advance to Paris. They were quite sincere about that.

One thing we did notice was that the prisoners

had evidently been told by their officers that the British treated their captives with ruthless barbarity. They evidently expected to be put in irons, if not slaughtered out of hand, and were quite agreeably surprised to find that they were given warm clothing and the same food as our own men. Indeed, at first we had some little difficulty in persuading them to eat and drink, for they were quite convinced that even such things as bowls of cocoa or cups of tea had been poisoned for their special benefit. The Bosche thinks in a very peculiar way.

However, they altered their opinion, and when they finally left the ship, they were profuse in their gratitude. I noticed, however, that there was a singular deficiency of cap-ribbons and crested buttons among them, and discovered that our bluejackets, with their usual insatiable craze for mementoes, had spent the trip home in bartering the same for cigarettes, tobacco and cakes of soap, all of which seemed greatly in demand.

The German officer, a warrant officer of the reserve, though firmly convinced that his country would win the war, was not quite so violently anti-British as some of his men. This I attribute to the facts that he had been born in Schleswig, and that his mother was a pure Dane. He spoke English like a native, and when I enquired into the reasons for this fluency, I was rather surprised to discover that he had English relations in Liverpool, that he had served as the mate of a British ship trading out of that port, and in various other British vessels in the Far East.

Altogether he rather disappointed me, for he was a mild, inoffensive person of rather chastened appearance, and did not at all fulfil my expectations of a brutal, square-headed Bosche. Moreover, he seemed quite overcome with gratitude when, seeing him shivering with cold on our homeward journey, I presented him with some socks, an old sweater, and a pair of rather disreputable under-garments long past their early youth, and informed him that he need not trouble to return them. He positively beamed when I added two cakes of soap to the gifts when he finally left the ship.

"Thank you! Thank you!" he said. "I will let my government know how well you have treated us. I hope, if ever you are made a prisoner by the German Navy, that you will be treated the same."

I hoped so too.

CHAPTER VII

THE BEEF TRIP

I

A COLD evening in March, with a bustling easterly wind which flicked the tops off the little seas in the harbour as the ebb tide brought the water from the Stour and Orwell swirling out to sea. Sunset was at about six o'clock, and now, at a quarter to, the colours of the dying day were already running riot over the western sky.

On our port hand, across a mile and a half of shimmering, tumbling water, lay the town of Harwich, a smear of dark purple with the irregular outline of its spires, roofs and chimneys silhouetted against the opalescence beyond. Further to the right, where the river broadened, were the slim grey shapes of several light cruisers lying at their buoys in mid-stream. Beyond them again came a floating dock, a couple of oilers moored head and stern, the black hull of the coal hulk "Himalaya," and another light cruiser. Finally, three or four miles away, the dim outline of Parkeston Quay with the ships alongside it, and a cluster of destroyers lying at their buoys in the river

with a pall of black oil-fuel smoke from one of them drifting to leeward in a low-lying cloud.

Over the nearer light cruisers lay the high land of Shotley Point, crowned with the buildings of the boys' training establishment, a gaunt signal tower, and the mast of a full rigged ship planted firmly on dry land whereon the seamen-to-be were instructed in the last remaining art of the old-time sailor, the ability to go aloft.

Immediately under the cluster of buildings, close inshore, lay the old "Ganges," her black side, with its vermilion waterline and white upperworks, its yellow masts and funnels, towering over the low grey shapes of her newer sisters.

The "Ganges," poor old ship, had been launched as the "Agincourt" in 1866, and, in the early seventies, had been the pride of the Channel Fleet as a smart cruiser with the then phenomenal speed of $13\frac{1}{2}$ knots. In those days she had been a full rigged ship with five masts, but now, with her masts reduced to three, served as an overflow vessel for the training establishment.

The old veteran must have felt rather forlorn and out of it with her more modern and more warlike sisters lying all round her. Times innumerable she had seen the light-cruisers and destroyers of the Harwich Force leaving harbour, had seen them return with blistered, salt-caked funnels and occasional shell-damage; sometimes a destroyer towed slowly into harbour after a mine explosion or a collision with an absurd list, her bows cocked up in the air, and her stern

nearly awash. She had seen the low grey submarines flitting unobtrusively out of harbour for their perilous work in the Heligoland Bight, had noticed that some of them never returned.

She never put out to sea. Her fighting days were over, though what she lacked in youth she more than made up for by the dignity of her appearance and the smartness of her "old navy" colouring. Nevertheless she rather reminded one of a matron masquerading in girl's clothing.

The first lieutenant and myself were walking up and down the narrow steel deck amidships for a breath of fresh air after the "frowstiness" of the wardroom. For the last day and a half the ship had been one of the "duty division" of four destroyers lying at the buoys in the Felixstowe trot. We had steam at a nominal one and a half hour's notice, but since we were there in case of a force being required to proceed suddenly to sea, experience had long since taught us that one and a half hours was generally construed as twenty minutes. Indeed, if we were ordered out, we were expected to be passing through the boom at the harbour mouth within half an hour of receiving the signal.

The tinkle of a mandoline travelled aft from somewhere under the forecastle, and clustered round the galley door a number of men smoking pipes were passing the time of day with cookie inside.

"Lord, how the matloes* eat!" muttered

* The seaman's favourite expression to describe himself. From the French "matelot," a seaman.

Number One, as a figure appeared from the galley door with a plate of food. "I wonder if that's his tea or his supper?"

"Just a snack in between whiles," I suggested. "Where the deuce some of those young ordinary seamen manage to stow their grub I'm blessed if I know."

"I know they have kippers for tea," said my companion. "When I went on to the mess-deck at evening quarters* I" he suddenly stopped short and levelled his glasses at a string of flags fluttering out from the masthead of one of the cruisers.

Four red and white answering pendants travelled slowly aloft in acknowledgement.

"I thought so," he continued, reading off the flags. "Duty division raise steam by ten thirty p.m. Someone else raise steam by. . . . I can't see the flags against the dark background. Beef trip for us, anyhow."

"Orfordness at eleven forty-five, North Hinder at half-past two, and the Maas† soon after five," I said, looking instinctively at the sky to windward, and then towards the mouth of the harbour where the whitecaps played on the banks outside. "I wonder what it'll be like plugging along to the eastward at twenty knots with this breeze against us?"

"Oh, not so bad," he answered. "A bit wet, perhaps; but it'll be all right when once we get under the lee of the Dutch coast. Any-

* Evening quarters, i.e., parade. Generally held at 4 p.m. in winter.

† Maas, i.e., the Maas Lightship off the Hook of Holland.

how, sir, we'll have wind and sea astern of us for the romp home."

"Thank Heaven for that," I said, making tracks for the wardroom.

2

We called it the "Beef trip" because in some remote fashion it reminded us of our midshipman days, when, in charge of the "blood boat," generally a sailing pinnace or a cutter, we left our ships at some unearthly hour in the morning to bring off from the shore the fresh meat which would presently be served out to the ship's company. It was before the period when the larger men-of-war were fitted with refrigerating chambers which would take a whole month's supply of fresh beef. In the old Channel Fleet we lived on the "hand to mouth" principle, drawing two or three days allowance of perishable provisions at a time. The sailors, whose appetites were healthy, consumed something over a ton of meat in three days.

It was never a pleasant job, for in spite of tarpaulins the stern sheets of the boat were never improved by the contact of raw meat. Sometimes, when we were routed out of our hammocks at six o'clock on a cold, blustery morning in mid-winter, to return a couple of hours later with a mountain of flesh wobbling in the stern, it was frankly detestable. The command of the "blood boat" was wisely delegated by the senior snotties to those "warts" or "dog's bodies" who had just come to sea from the "Britannia," and the only place

where we really liked the job was at Gibraltar, where the meat store was barely fifty yards from the fruit market. The price of tangerines was six a penny, which was well within our one and ninepence a day, less threepence per diem to the rapacious naval instructor.

Our "beef trips" at Harwich, when we convoyed mercantile traffic to and fro between the Shipwash lightship, off Orfordness, and the Hook of Holland, were really not "beef trips" at all. What the ships of the outward bound convoys carried I never quite discovered, but those coming from Holland were laden among other things with margarine, dairy produce, lard, and Dutch cheeses. I remember once steaming through several acres of the latter after some vessel or another had been torpedoed and sunk. Had we been able to stop and salvage them we should have reaped a plentiful harvest; but Fritz was in the neighbourhood and we went on our way with the ship's company casting covetous eyes at the bobbing red spheres as we sped past. It was a mortifying moment. I can only hope they floated home to England, and not into the Heligoland Bight.

The regular trips to and fro started in 1916 and continued until the end of the war. They were not unexciting, for submarines were ever on the prowl and took occasional toll of the convoys, in addition to which the enemy spent much money and energy in laying mines in the areas through which they knew the merchant traffic and their escorts must pass. Some half a dozen merchantmen were lost on the route during the war, but the casualties

among the escorting destroyers were far heavier in proportion, one flotilla leader and one destroyer being sunk by submarines, five destroyers by mines, and one by collision. Besides these several others, though badly damaged, were able to limp back into harbour.

It was on the night of December 23rd, 1917, however, in an extensive minefield laid by the enemy off the Dutch coast, that the Harwich Force suffered one of its severest blows in the loss of the "Surprise," "Torrent," and "Tornado," all in the space of a single hour. One of these ships struck a mine and a second went to her assistance, only to be blown up herself. A precisely similar fate met the third vessel while she was endeavouring to rescue the crews of the other two. The fourth destroyer on the scene, the "Radiant," Commander G. F. S. Nash, performed most gallant work and saved many valuable lives, but barely a quarter of the crews of the three ships survived. How the "Radiant" ever got clear without coming to grief is a mystery, for when the armistice came and the enemy were forced to disclose the position of their minefields, it was discovered that they had laid no less than four hundred mines in this particular locality.

But taking things all round the Germans displayed surprisingly little initiative. When the Dutch convoy first was originated some of the ships, small coasting steamers, were ancient creaks with a speed of no more than seven knots. Other craft among them, better found, could steam ten, twelve, or even fifteen knots, but as they all pounded along at their best

gait the leader was some twenty-four miles ahead of the sternmost vessel at the end of three hours. The length of the journey was perhaps a hundred miles, so by the time the fastest vessel arrived at the Hook, the slowest was just over halfway across.

There were perhaps ten or twelve merchantmen spread out over many miles of sea. There were six or eight destroyers to guard them, and what would have happened if a strong German flotilla from Zeebrugge—barely fifty miles from Rotterdam—had made a determined raid upon the scattered convoy and equally scattered destroyers, I dread to think. I remember at the time we all pictured to ourselves what might happen—but it never did.

In course of time, however, when the convoys became a regular matter of routine, the slower ships were eliminated altogether, and the others were kept concentrated in more or less orderly formation with destroyers spread out and zig-zagging at high speed all round them as a protection against submarines. Out of sight, also, but within easy reach in case of necessity, were a couple of light cruisers to act as supports in the event of a hostile destroyer raid.

But in spite of all precautions on our part the German flotillas from Zeebrugge, had they been used with determination, might altogether have put a stop to the "beef trip" carried on under their very noses. It would have been quite easy, for most of our journeys were carried out at night, when, in the inevitable flurry and confusion of a sudden raid, the attacking destroyers might have done their

evil work and have stood an excellent chance of getting home undamaged. One can hardly imagine a procession of German merchant ships getting safely home within fifty miles of a British base—at least, one hopes not.

As it was, however, the wily Bosche preferred to expend his energy on those rather futile “tip and run” raids into the Dover Straits where, as often as not, he got a severe drubbing for his pains.

3

By 10.45, after some preliminary manoeuvring to get clear of our buoys, we were moving slowly seaward in line ahead past the vessels marking the opening through the boom, with their red and green lights twinkling in the darkness. Steaming on past the Beach End buoy outside the entrance we swung round to port, heading up the fairway towards the Cork light-vessel, off Felixstowe, which, throughout the war, served as the starting and finishing point of all our journeys.

About ten minutes later the lightship was abeam, and a signal came flickering down the line from the leader.

“Twenty knots,” it said. “Show no lights at all,” and with the wash bubbling round our sterns and nothing but the pale blue gleam of the shaded stern lights visible in the darkness, we swept on towards Orfordness.

Soon afterwards the regular five second flashes of the lighthouse, displayed for our special benefit, were punctuating the obscurity fine on the port bow, and shortly before midnight,

when it was abeam, we altered course to the eastward towards the open sea on our way for the Noord Hinder lightship, the half-way milestone in our journey to the Dutch coast.

Nothing out of the ordinary occurred during the trip across. We had done it so often before that it had long since lost its original novelty. Indeed, it seemed surprising that the ocean had not been worn into a regu'ar broad furrow with the passing of so many ships on the track between Orfordness, and the Noord Hinder and Maas light-vessels. Some of us longed for a change of air—some alleviation to the dense fogs of early spring and summer, and the short, snappy seas kicked up at a moment's notice by the fierce south-westerly blows.

We were becoming a little weary of the perpetual vista of grey sky and slate-grey water flecked with white horses and burdened with the squat shapes of our bustling convoys, tired of the eternal Maas-Noord Hinder-Shipwash-Orfordness route, along which, backwards and forwards, week after week, and month after month, we convoyed the freighters. I verily believe that the merchantmen could have found their way to and fro without human assistance ; I am quite certain the destroyers could have done so without any reference to a chart. We knew the courses by heart.

The German submarines were always with us, ready to take advantage of our slightest laxity to fire a torpedo into the brown of the convoy, while the submarine minelayers went to considerable trouble to mine the approaches to Harwich in the hope of causing us damage.

Sometimes they succeeded, for it was a German mine, on February 11th, 1916, which resulted in the loss of the "Arethusa," within six miles of the entrance to the harbour on one of our homeward journeys. Though every effort was made to save the ship she was vitally damaged, and eventually drifted ashore on the South Cutler shoal where she broke her back and settled down. There she will remain, until sea and shifting sand have done their handiwork and obliterated the brave little vessel for ever.

But the "Arethusa" was not the only vessel which suffered through the hostile minelaying. Other light cruisers and destroyers also came to grief, though most of them managed to struggle back into harbour and were eventually repaired. However, the whole tract of water lying between Orfordness and the North Foreland was a veritable ocean graveyard. At one period our chart showed no less than forty-three wrecks of merchant ships between these places, and they were all due to enemy mines or submarines.

The signal we frequently received: "The port of Harwich is closed due to mines," rarely seemed to make any difference. We went to sea just the same, mines or no mines. We simply had to.

Every time we sallied forth it behoved us to be careful, for besides mines and submarines there was always the chance, the chance we all longed for, that we might tumble up against some hostile destroyer flotilla from Zeebrugge during the hours of darkness. Our respective tracks, British and German, must have crossed

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on many occasions, but the Bosche surface craft, albeit they were wily and fought like fiends if they were engaged, and had no chance of escape, were very shy birds. However, we were taking no chances, and while during the daytime at sea our depth charges and one gun were kept ready for instant use in the event of our happening across a submarine, guns and torpedo-tubes were invariably kept manned throughout the night.

The sea, in spite of the stiff easterly breeze, was not so bad as it might have been, and we rattled along with no further discomfort than the usual sheets of spray flying over fore-castle, bridge, and upper deck. But spray, and plenty of it, was all in the day's work. Oilskins, sou' westers, leather sea-boots, and a variety of woollen mufflers and undergarments formed our usual seagoing kit during winter and early spring. We were so swathed in clothes, in fact, that even climbing the bridge ladder was a matter of some difficulty.

The twinkling light of our old friend the Noord Hinder hove up on the starboard bow, drew abeam, and disappeared over the horizon astern, and by the time the reddish glow of dawn was beginning to encroach upon the paling indigo of the eastern sky, the spasmodic flicker of the Maas lightship was in clear sight ahead. We approached it rapidly, until it was soon abeam and the red and white lights of the Dutch pilot vessel stationed off the Hook of Holland appeared in sight beyond.

We had arrived at the turning point of our journey. A nearer approach to the land would bring us into Dutch territorial waters, and

putting our helms over we steamed to and fro, waiting with what patience we could muster for the arrival of our convoy.

It was more than we could afford to loiter aimlessly about at slow speed, for the Maas was a favourite rendezvous for enemy submarines. A short while before, indeed, one of our destroyers had been torpedoed in this self-same spot, in spite of the fact that she had been steaming twenty knots. The German submarine commander, however, must have been painfully surprised at the ill success of his exploit, for though the torpedo struck the destroyer in the stern and duly exploded in its upheaval of smoke and spray, the target, instead of being brought to a standstill for the *coup de grace*, was still able to steam away at fifteen knots until she was out of harm's way. She then summoned friends to her assistance by wireless, and in due course reached a British dockyard where she was repaired.

The torpedo, according to all accounts, struck the tip of her rudder, and her escape was one of the many lucky ones of the war. Her name, lest I be accused of exaggeration, was the "Moorsom."

We waited for half an hour, by which time the darkness of the night had given way to that curious half-light which obtains between dawn and sunrise. The sea, ruffled by the wind, had assumed a deep purple-blue, save to the east, where its leaping waters reflected the pale rosiness of the growing day. There was fog over the coast, fog which hung in a low-lying bank close and thick on the eastern horizon,

but presently we saw a thin smear of funnel smoke staining the clearer atmosphere above. It thickened appreciably as the minutes passed, every shovelful of coal flung into the furnaces of ships as yet invisible in the murk spelt out in black smoke puffs against the background of sky. Then, looming one by one out of the mist, came a number of dark blotches, the blurred outlines of which presently resolved themselves into the hulls of our expected convoy. There were ten ships all told, steaming in no ordered formation, but seeming to jostle each other as the faster vessels overhauled their less nimble sisters, and the more ancient among them gradually dropped astern towards the tail of the procession.

We steamed towards them, checking their names and number from the lists with which we had been provided before sailing. They were all correct and present, and with one destroyer zig-zagging ahead, another on either flank, and the fourth astern, the convoy plodded on at its best gait.

The procession soon started to straggle out into a long line as the speed of the various ships asserted itself. Within an hour, by which time it was full daylight and the sun was sparkling across the water, the fastest ship, a fifteen knotter, was leading by a couple of miles. Behind her came a bunch of three steaming close together and making good between eleven and twelve knots, then four more dawdling along at ten, with, astern of them again, the two laggards of the party, one pounding along at nine knots and the other at seven and a half.

And we, for our sins, were responsible for the rear of the convoy, and had to do our utmost to prevent any prowling submarine from firing a torpedo at a venerable relic of chastened appearance whose nominal speed was ten knots, but could steam no more than seven and a half. But for the war and the enhanced value of shipping that vessel would long since have found her way to a shipbreaker's yard. Her presence in an area infested by submarines was a mere source of danger to herself and a considerable anxiety to us, who had to protect her as best we could. Already the convoy stretched over more than seven miles of water, and in three hours' time the leading ships would be out of sight. By the time the fifteen knotter reached the English coast, indeed, we, with our ambling charge, would be some sixty-five miles behind. It was not an enjoyable prospect.

"Please increase your speed," we spelt slowly out on our semaphore, having at last succeeded in attracting her attention by repeated blasts on the siren.

"Please repeat signal," she answered.

We did so.

"Am going full speed now," came back.

"You are not steaming ten knots," we retorted.

"Very sorry," she answered. "Our coal is bad."

"Please make every effort to increase your speed," we flung back.

One cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, however, and though that tramp's engineers drove their ancient craft all they knew—

till smoke and flame poured from her stumpy funnel, and her antiquated engines clanked like a knight in armour—she never exceeded a fraction over eight knots.

Bitter were the imprecations levelled against the owners who sent such a vessel to sea in a submarine area for us to look after and protect. They sat at home and raked in the golden harvest earned by their aged relic of the 'seventies, and, as she was probably well covered by insurance, I much doubt if they would have been seriously inconvenienced if she had been torpedoed and sent to the bottom.

But we dreaded the idea, for the first question which would inevitably have been asked would have been, "Where were the destroyers?"

Poor destroyers! They have had to shoulder the burden of a great many people's sins and omissions during the war.

By eleven o'clock the leading ships of the outward bound convoy, escorted by their destroyers, were passing us on an opposite course.

"Anything doing to the westward?" we flashed on our searchlight, as a destroyer, digging her bows into the steep tumble of a sea, slashed past us at twenty knots with clouds of spray sweeping over her bridge.

"Nothing except a wet shirt," came the ribald reply. "I don't like the look of that Noah's Ark you're escorting. Where did she spring from?"

"Lord knows," we answered.

By the time the red hull of the Hoord Hinder lightship hove up in sight six hours after our departure, only five of our own convoy were

still in sight ahead, one little party, the ten knot brigade, being practically hull down over the horizon, and the solitary nine knotter about six miles in front of us.

And the lightship, since it was the half-way house which we must pass in sight of to verify our position, was a favourite cruising ground for enemy submarines. We always took good care to give it a wide berth during daylight, but on this occasion the entire convoys, both outward and homeward bound, passed it without sighting the tell-tale flutter of a hostile periscope, or the whitened track of a torpedo stretching across the sea like a sunbaked pathway across a meadow. The sea seemed quite innocent of Fritz, and either he and his friends were too busy in some other locality to worry their heads about us, or else the many German agents in Rotterdam had been misinformed as to the precise time the convoy was due to sail. Anyhow, the submarines neglected a golden opportunity, and we were duly thankful for their laxity.

At about six o'clock in the evening, by which time the sun had set and the darkness was already drawing in, we made the first of the buoys marking the swept channel off the English coast. The other destroyers of our division, having seen their charges in safety, had previously joined us one by one, and by the time the bobbing red buoy with its white identification letter was abeam, and our lumbering old tramp, with an ironical waggle of her rusty stern altered course to the southward down the swept channel on her way

to her final destination, the first part of our task was finished.

We had still to wait until the outward bound convoy reached its destination in safety, though by the time we four destroyers had formed up into single line ahead and were again steaming to the eastward, the usual wireless signal came speeding through a hundred miles of space.

It was from the senior officer of destroyers with the outward bound convoy, which had arrived at the spot off the Dutch coast whence we had started some twelve hours earlier.

" Convoy arrived intact," it said in code. " Am returning."

It was the signal for us also to return, and with joyful hearts our helms went over and we circled round to the westward on our way back to the base at twenty-two knots.

A couple of hours later, with our funnels caked white with salt, we were peacefully secured alongside the oilers in Harwich harbour replenishing our fuel.

The " beef trip " was over. Yet another consignment of margarine and Dutch cheeses had been brought into the United Kingdom. It is to be hoped that the British public knew whence they came.

Our regular jaunts to and fro across the Narrow Seas were not always so uneventful. There was the occasion when the fast steamer " Copenhagen," belonging to the Great Eastern Railway Company, was torpedoed in full daylight and bad weather midway between the English coast and the Noord Hinder. It so

happened that her destroyer escort was unable to keep up on account of the heavy sea, and the "Copenhagen," trusting to her eighteen knots or so, pushed on alone.

But as luck would have it a torpedo from a submarine struck her fair in the boiler room, and though the ship did not sink, and finally got back into harbour and was repaired, I still remember one or two incidents connected with the affair.

We happened to be at sea to the eastward on other business, and hearing the wireless calls for help retracted our footsteps at full speed. We came upon the "Copenhagen" heeling over to a dangerous angle, and the passengers and crew tossing about in their boats in the angry sea. The submarine, too, was still somewhere in the neighbourhood, for as we circled round while other destroyers carried on their work of rescue, we suddenly saw a torpedo coming towards us. It was running on the surface, its blunt copper head and striker clearly visible as it travelled from crest to crest.

Our engine-room reply gong clanged madly as the starboard telegraph was flung round to full speed astern and the helm rattled over to bring the ship sharp round on her heel. There was little time to waste, but she obeyed nobly, and the torpedo, instead of hitting, passed some seventy yards ahead and travelled on towards the horizon.

There was another day when one of the merchant ships on the "beef trip" was torpedoed and set on fire, and a destroyer, running

alongside in a heavy sea and with considerable risk to herself, rescued the crew before the vessel sank. There was the pitch dark night when a destroyer came into collision at high speed with one of a convoy travelling in the opposite direction, and limped back into Harwich with an enormous gash in her bows stuffed with hammocks to prevent the entry of the water.

So the " Beef trip " was not always monotonous. Six merchant vessels were sunk on the route during the war, a mere nothing compared with losses in other areas. But it was a constant tale of destroyers sunk and damaged by mines, torpedoes, or collision. Hardly a week passed without an unforgettable incident of some sort.

In something over four years of war many good men terminated their last commissions in that brief stretch of sea which lies between England and the Netherlands—the old " Narrow Seas " of Lord Howard of Effingham.

The sepulchre of these men is the grey wind-flecked water ; their tombstone a myriad foaming whitecaps ; their epitaph, perchance, is written across the Heavens in the trail of smoke from some rusty British tramp.

They were our friends and our flotillamates, men whom we regarded as brothers, and their memory will ever be green in our thoughts. But their sacrifice was not in vain, for of a surety they gave their lives that Britain might live. They died for the Freedom of the Seas, the freedom which applies to the weak equally as to the strong, security for such as pass on the seas upon their lawful occasions.

CHAPTER VIII

DOVER AND THE BELGIAN COAST

I

FROM early in 1916 until, I believe, the end of the war, a division or two of the Harwich Force destroyers were generally attached to the Dover Patrol to supplement the small number of torpedo craft working in that important area. It is no part of my business to describe the various encounters in the Dover Straits between the German destroyers from Zeebrugge and our own. The stories of the "Swift" and "Broke," and the "Botha" and "Morris" are already well known, while the many activities of the swarm of monitors, cruisers, minelayers, destroyers, auxiliary patrol drifters, coastal motor boats, and motor launches which at one time or another had Dover as their base have already been recounted by those actually serving in them, and therefore better qualified to tell their story than myself. We did not belong to the Dover Patrol. We were merely lent to it, so I shall try to confine myself to what we actually saw and did rather than what we heard and were told.

The Harwich detachment working in the

Dover area was generally relieved every four weeks, and we soon found that being there was no rest cure. On the contrary, things were even more strenuous than at Harwich, for though we did not have the long trips to sea, we were always on the move.

There was a lot to be done. Nightly patrols on the cross-channel mine-net barrage between the Goodwin Sands and the shoals off Grave-lines on the French coast; another patrol by day off the mine-net barrage off the Belgian coast between Nieuport and the Scheldt; transports to be escorted to and fro between Folkestone and Dover and Calais and Boulogne; submarine hunts at odd intervals; and detachments of destroyers in the Downs and off Dunkerque to engage enemy destroyers if they appeared. Our speciality was the Belgian coast barrage, work on which will be described later.

As regards the destroyer cross-channel patrols it was always easy for the Germans to sally forth from their Flanders bases at their own selected moments to raid the patrol line with the idea of getting at the transport traffic beyond it. The enemy destroyers had little else to do, and when they did put to sea, a bare hour's steaming at thirty knots from Zeebrugge brought them into contact with our destroyers and patrol vessels. The enemy, moreover, could come out ready for instant action, with their guns constantly manned and torpedoes always ready, and with the full knowledge that any craft they sighted outside their own waters were certainly hostile.

Our patrols, however, had to be out all night and every night, for they were working against submarines as well as destroyers. They had always to be ready for action, and sometimes for nights on end, fair weather or foul, officers were never off their bridges or men away from their guns and torpedo-tubes. They worked in an area crowded with their friends, with the consequence that any suspicious vessel had to be challenged and identified before being engaged. If the visitor did happen to be a German the only reply was a salvo of shell or a torpedo. In a word, the enemy, through force of circumstances, always had the initiative.

It looks easy enough on paper to patrol a narrow stretch of water only twenty-two miles wide, but it is by no means so simple in actual practice. One can place destroyers at frequent intervals, like beads threaded on a string, behind minefields and miles of explosive nets, and go to bed thinking that an enemy cannot pass that way. One can have supporting groups of destroyers behind the patrol line ready to engage if the enemy does break through, but an enemy steaming at thirty knots on a dark night with a visibility of a few hundred yards is here one moment and gone the next, while a minefield, however well laid, is never infallible. It is always comforting, when steaming over mined areas oneself, as we subsequently had to on many occasions, to realise that there is always much more clear water than there are mines, however thickly the field may have been laid. As for mine-nets—well, they have blown up

many craft, destroyers included, but it is by no means impossible to steam through them without damage. We once did it ourselves in a fog without meaning to, and nothing happened.

Looking back on it and taking all these things into consideration it is surprising that the German destroyer flotillas did so comparatively little damage. They broke through several times and bombarded Ramsgate, Dover, Dunkerque, and other places. They sank a number of our destroyers and patrol craft, but never once did they really push home an attack in force. Had they done so they might have achieved considerable success, for the odds were all in their favour. They were not very energetic.

Officers and men of the patrolling destroyers were supposed to make up for their lack of sleep in the daytime or as best they could. In the daytime, however, they were generally escorting transports or hunting submarines, and even if they were in harbour it was usually "at the ready," at five minutes notice for steam. There was also the usual routine work to be done—the ship to be kept tolerably presentable, provisions to be drawn, oil fuel to be replenished, official correspondence and paper work to be waded through, confidential books and documents to be acknowledged and digested.

Once in every three or four days they spent the afternoon at an hour's notice for steam, which meant that people could go ashore provided they did not go out of sight of their ships in case of a sudden recall, and on these

occasions one generally found the officers no farther than the Yacht Club, on the sea front within two minutes of the pier.

The club was a favourite rendezvous for the Navy, and at the time that air-raids were still a popular German diversion, I well remember hearing two civilian members, both over military age, congratulating each other on being able to sleep safely in their beds.

"We shan't get any of those damned aeroplanes to-night," said one, rubbing his hands with glee. "The glass has gone down with a bang and it's blowing up for a gale from the south west!"

"Thank Heaven for that!" the second agreed. "What about a glass of sherry to celebrate it?"

"I think I'll join you, sir," came the sleepy voice of a lieutenant-commander from the depths of an armchair. "You won't get your bombs to-night, but I'm on the barrage patrol. Going to sea at seven-thirty."

Once every month or so came the destroyers' "boiler cleaning," when they went into the basin for an overhaul and clean up of their boilers and machinery while officers and men had a well earned rest. Once every four or five months came a refit in a dockyard, when the ships' companies went on ten days or a fortnight's leave.

And thus it continued, from August, 1914, to the day of the armistice, fifty-one months later. It was a strenuous life.

The Dover Patrol suffered heavy casualties. Destroyers, as well as numbers of other craft,

were damaged by gunfire, torpedoes, or mines, while not a few were sunk. But their places were soon filled by other craft and the work went on unceasingly. It simply had to. It got even more strenuous as it progressed, until it culminated in the establishment of that deep, cross-channel minefield between Folkestone and Cape Grisnez which, illuminated at night, effectually put a stop to the passage of German submarines through the Straits of Dover. This, and the blocking of Zeebrugge and Ostende in April and May, 1918, may be considered the high-water mark of its achievement.

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Every coast I know and every seaport I have ever visited has an odour peculiar to itself. What is known to seaside visitors as "the smell of the sea" frequently resolves itself on investigation into the scent of seaweed or uncovered mud flats, but at sea ten miles off the coast of Devon I have often noticed the rich, earthy aroma of the soil newly wetted by a shower of rain.

I have identified the hops of Kent and the hayfields of Essex in the breezes of the Thames estuary, and the clean tang of flowering heather in the summer zephyrs of Scapa Flow. Arosa Bay, in the north of Spain, is celebrated for its whiffs of garlic intermingled with the indescribable emanations of a sardine cannery, while Hong Kong seems to disport itself in a medley of camphor-wood, varnish, and disinfectant. Yokohama—unless one probes too deeply and is disillusioned—smells typically

oriental, like one of those tiny, paper-dressed Japanese dolls one sometimes finds in a cracker. As for the passing fragrance of a perfumery shop in petrol-drenched Bond Street—it is nothing to the scent of the off-shore breezes near Ceylon or in the Straits of Malacca, when the wind is heavy with a delicious, subtle essence of spices, flowers, and sun-baked plantations which one can appreciate a full fifty miles out at sea.

I could write a long paper on different odours and their associations in my mind, but I shall never forget, nor ever be able exactly to describe, the pungent but not unpleasing smell of Dunkerque. The least suspicion of it in the breeze would at once set me thinking of the twin wooden piers at the narrow entrance to the harbour, with the tall lighthouse, the docks and basins of the inner harbour, and the quaint, old-world town beyond. It would conjure up the dismal sound of the hooter of the lightship moored in the inner basin as it gave us warning of an approaching air-raid, the sullen booming and crashing of the anti-aircraft guns as they opened fire, and the sight of the white-winged German aeroplanes hovering overhead in broad daylight and dropping their murderous bombs on the devoted town while the blue sky all round them was furred and pockmarked with the fleecy clouds and bulbous smoke-bursts of exploding shell. I should remember the uncanny whining of the bombs as they fell, the echoing thud or ear-splitting crash as they exploded, sometimes far away and sometimes

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near at hand. I should picture in my mind's eye the people running for shelter, the bomb craters in the cobbled roadways, and the façades of the tall houses all torn, slashed, and pitted with slivers of steel and stone sprayed up by the high explosive.

Dunkerque suffered severely during the war, more severely than one can realise unless one was actually there. Not only was it subjected to perpetual air-raids for four years on end, but it also suffered an occasional shelling from an obnoxious long-range German battery not far from Ostende, one projectile from which practically demolished the roof of the cathedral. The casualties were heavy and many of the inhabitants left, but those who remained seemed in no way perturbed. Business went on as usual, the children went to school, and azure-clothed "poilus" still sauntered about the streets smoking their everlasting "caporal" cigarettes. People naturally disappeared like rabbits when the hooter went, but otherwise, except for the rumble and thunder of the guns on the front fifteen miles away, everything seemed much the same as usual. The town richly deserved the Distinguished Service Cross which was handed to the Maire on behalf of His Majesty and the Dover Patrol by Vice-Admiral Sir Roger Keyes, for it acted as the base for a good many British men-of-war. But Dunkerque brings back more to my memory than mere air-raids. We sometimes lay in the little "avant port," with a swarm of monitors, destroyers, paddle minesweepers, auxiliary patrol vessels and other craft working

on the Belgian coast barrage. So shallow was the harbour that at low water we could not keep our pumps and circulators going for fear of filling our condensers with an unsavoury mixture of seaweed, mud, and small fish, so for an hour on either side of low tide we were compelled to let steam die down. Then it was that we were able to have a brief scamper ashore, air-raids always permitting.

Dunkerque was well known as a privateering port in the days when France and ourselves were fighting against, instead of with, each other, and in the Place Jean Bart was a confectioner's shop where we bought boxes of those liqueur-filled chocolates which gladdened the hearts of our womenfolk at Harwich. I remember the rather stately lady in tight black satin behind the counter who was amused at my French and greeted me as an old friend when I repeated the order a month later, only to find that the manufacture of chocolates of the liqueur variety had ceased. She had a merry smile and a way of shrugging her well-covered shoulders and attributing every misfortune to "ces sales Bosches," even to the swarm of flies and the melting of her chocolate in the summer heat. I hope she is still there, and that her husband has rejoined her. She seemed a little anxious.

There was the "Chapeau Rouge" where we sometimes dined, and the "Taverne Charles" where we ate stewed mussels and drank bock, and where I, seeing them on the "carte," once ordered six ham sandwiches to fill up an aching void between lunch and dinner.

"Six!" murmured the garçon in amazement.

"Oui. Six," I reiterated.

"I will bring one," he announced firmly.

"But one will not be enough," I protested.

"I am hungry."

"One will be sufficient," he persisted.

"Listen to me."

He was so determined that I eventually let him have his own way, and when the "sandwich" did arrive I was glad of his obstinacy. It was a thing the size of a breakfast plate with bread three quarters of an inch thick and the ham in the middle in proportion.

The garçon smiled sadly as he handed me my change.

"Les Anglais sont toujours drolles," he murmured. "Six sand'vich ! Oh, mon Dieu, quel bon appetit !"

3

Dawn.

A calm, untroubled sea shining dully like burnished steel in the reflected glory of the approaching sunrise. Here and there the water was furred in patches by faint catspaws of air stealing gently along its surface, while to starboard a long streak of rippling water showed where the strong tide played along the edge of a covered sandbank. On either quarter, the heavy, smooth-bosomed undulations caused by the passage of many vessels rolled ceaselessly away towards the horizon, toppling over and breaking now and then as their forward momentum was checked by shallow water.

We were steaming to the north-eastward between the East Dyck and Outer Ratel shoals

off Nieuport, and the low coast on our starboard hand, eight or nine miles distant, lay as a narrow ebon smear against a broad band of smoky purple stretching across the lower sky. Nieuport itself, where the opposing trench lines met the sea, was clearly marked by the occasional glare of a shell-star bursting overhead, its dazzling illumination bathing the grey sheen of the distant horizon in a ghastly radiance. Further to the right the quivering beam of a searchlight from La Panne swung uneasily to and fro across the water.

Above the haze on the horizon the sky over the land was rosy with the first flush of the rising sun, and away on our starboard bow, where lay Ostende, it sparkled and scintillated with a myriad flashes of flame. They were the German anti-aircraft shell fired at our aeroplanes as they returned from a bombing expedition, and the heavens were spotted and scarred with their smoke bursts, some bulbous and clearly defined, others ragged as they drifted away on the gentle breeze. They showed purple, brown, and intensely blue against the clear background of sky. The deep-throated rumble of guns came rolling seaward.

It was April 25th—Easter Monday—1916, by which time the depredations of the German submarines passing westward through the Straits of Dover into the Channel and Atlantic were becoming a matter of serious importance. We were engaged in an operation designed principally to check the activity of the "U" boats working from Zeebrugge, and without

entering into too much detail it may be said that it was the intention to enclose the entire Flanders coast within a ring fence composed of double lines of mines backed up by explosive nets.* The barrage when completed would be nearly forty miles long, and for the greater portion of its length would run from twelve to fifteen miles distant from, and parallel to, the enemy's coast. At either extremity of this line the ends of the barrage would curve inwards towards the entrance to the Scheldt at one end, and Dunkerque at the other. Once laid it was to be regularly patrolled by monitors, destroyers, and submarines.

It was a considerable undertaking, for among other things many thousands of mines had to be laid accurately among the treacherous shoals off the coast. This portion of the work had to be done by large minelayers under cover of darkness, no very easy task with the absence of lights and other navigational safeguards. The laying of the mines alone would take several weeks, and on the night of April 24th-25th the minelayers, escorted by destroyers in case of a possible attack by the German flotillas stationed on the coast, had already begun their operations. But by dawn they had disappeared, and at the time we arrived on the scene were probably well on their way towards Sheerness where they would embark fresh cargoes to continue the process.

It was quite a respectable armada that set forth from Dunkerque Roads shortly before

* i.e., nets with mines secured at intervals along them.

dawn on that Easter Monday. In the front went six paddle minesweepers, ex-pleasure steamers which, in the piping times of peace, had been used for no more warlike purpose than the carrying of excursionists between London, Southend, and Clacton, and various of the watering places on the south coast. They had their sweeps out, for we were treading on virgin ground.

Behind, steaming at an unusually leisurely speed of nine knots to avoid overhauling the sweepers, came ourselves—a division of four destroyers from Harwich—while astern of us, fading away into the distance, came long lines of fishing drifters steaming two by two in orderly formation. They were the net layers, and were headed by their own “Admiral” in the shape of a retired captain of the Royal Navy. They were prosaic-looking, stubby little craft with homely names, manned for the greater part by fishermen and officered by their own fishing skippers, with lieutenants R.N.R. as divisional leaders. They steamed along as solemnly as battleships with flag signals fluttering here and there from their stumpy mastheads, and the way in which they carried out their movements and kept station left nothing at all to be desired.

The lines of drifters were flanked by more destroyers from the Dover Patrol to act the part of watch-dogs and whippers-in if things started to go wrong, while at the very tail of the procession, their squat, uncouth shapes and heavy tripod masts and control positions showing up over the horizon like the Martian

engines of war conceived in Mr. H. G. Wells' freakish imagination, came a couple of blister-sided monitors. They seemed to pile up the water in front of them as they waddled along at a full speed of something under seven knots, but we were very glad to have them with us. They carried heavy metal, did these strange beasts, and as it was our business to cover the drifters while they laid their lines of nets, there was no knowing that the monitors' 12 and 14 inch guns might not come in usefully if the enemy's destroyers became too venturesome.

Moreover, we had heard fabulous tales of the accuracy of the hostile long-range batteries along the Belgian coast, and of how they could almost drop their shell on a sixpenny piece at a range of 38,000 yards, or nineteen sea miles. It was going to be an exceptionally clear day and we were going considerably closer than nineteen miles, so there was some consolation in thinking that we had something big on our side with which to retaliate in case of necessity.

The light grew as we advanced. The purple mist lying over the land faded away as the sun rose and gathered strength, and soon we could see the buildings and spires of Ostende silhouetted darkly over the horizon against the flame-coloured sky beyond. Next we sighted Blankenberghe, then the chimneys and buildings of Zeebrugge itself with a thin pall of smoke hanging overhead. The coast itself, with its low sand dunes, was too far off to be visible from our low bridges.

The Germans were evidently on the alert, for no sooner had daylight arrived than we saw an observation balloon rising slowly over Ostende until it hung motionless several thousand feet aloft like an elongated purple ? in the pale yellow of the upper sky. Another appeared midway between Ostende and Blankenberghe, then a third—until finally there was a chain of five of them stretching along the hostile coast. Their presence was a sure sign that our aerop'anes had completed their business and had returned to their aerodromes near Dunkerque.

It was an uncanny feeling to know that we were being watched, and our every movement reported, by intelligent observers with good glasses suspended in the basket beneath those bulging gas-bags. They were a full thirteen miles away, but at their great height the sea lay stretched out before them like a map. One felt so dreadfully small and naked.

"They are within easy range," one could almost imagine them saying to the batteries down the telephone wires. "A number of destroyers and any amount of small fry. Why not blaze off a round or two for luck? There is a fair chance of hitting something."

But evidently the batteries decided we were not worthy of their expensive shell, for they suffered us to pass unmolested.

We had already reached the line of mark-buoys laid by one of the destroyers which had been escorting the minelayers. The buoys indicated the line, a few hundred yards to seaward of the mines, where the drifters were to

lay their nets, and pair by pair the little craft had swung out of the procession to start their operations. The work was soon in full progress.

The cheerful smell of frying bacon was wafted onto the bridge from the galley below as the cook struggled with breakfast for nearly a hundred hungry souls, and presently a steward arrived to tell me that my meal was ready in the charthouse. I was quite ready for it, but had hardly knocked the top off my first egg when I was disturbed by the thump of a heavy explosion fairly close. I dashed onto the bridge, thinking that the batteries had thought better of it and had opened fire at last, but it was only a covey of enemy seaplanes which, scenting something small and inoffensive whereon to wreck their frightfulness, were dropping their bombs in among the drifters.

Our anti-aircraft guns opened fire on the instant, but the bombs still fell, and I watched the great splashes darting out of the water in the midst of our closely clustered flotilla. Time after time I could have sworn that some vessel had been hit ; but on each occasion the plume of spray fell to reveal a drifter still steaming stolidly on. It might have been a shower of rain for all the notice they took of the bombardment.

I still treasure a vivid recollection of a fat red face covered in hair and with a pipe in its mouth craned over the small wheelhouse window of a drifter alongside of which a bomb had just exploded. The eyes were directed upwards, and the expression of utter fury on that skipper's countenance was a sight

never to be forgotten. I could see his lips moving, though the remarks, unfortunately, were inaudible; but it reminded me irresistibly of an infuriated householder whose door-knocker has been rattled by a rapidly retreating urchin against whom there are no possible means of retaliation. Those drifters were wholly admirable. Nothing ever seemed capable of disturbing their equanimity.

There appeared to be a number of submarines in the vicinity, and during the forenoon we destroyers spent some time hunting one craft whose conning-tower had appeared above the surface some eight or nine miles north of Zeebrugge and inside the line of explosive nets. Our efforts, however, were unsuccessful, for the "U" boat never reappeared, nor could we find any traces of him.

It was not until the early afternoon that the first "kill" was actually made, and it was really brought about by the presence of mind of the skipper and men of the drifter "Gleaner of the Sea." This small vessel was lying at anchor with her ship's company busy at their work of laying explosive nets, when a submarine suddenly bobbed up under the bows and fouled the mooring wire. The skipper, running forward with a lance-bomb—a small bomb secured at the end of a short wooden staff like an exaggerated broomstick, and specially designed to be thrown by hand and to burst on impact—promptly hurled it onto the fore-deck of the visitor. It landed fair and square and exploded, whereupon the submarine began to slide bows first down the

mooring wire. The wire, unequal to the strain, parted, and the " U " boat seemed to sink straight to the bottom in the usual rush of air and oil. More bombs were dropped, and later in the afternoon, as oil and bubbles were coming to the surface, a destroyer fired her explosive sweep immediately over the spot. This effectually finished the business, but there is little doubt that the credit for the affair was principally due to the stout arm and accurate eye of the " Gleaner of the Sea's " skipper.

At the time this incident was going on we were busily employed in another direction.

CHAPTER IX

HEAVY METAL

“**E**NEMY destroyers, sir !”

It was a quarter to three, and I was suddenly awakened by a messenger tugging at my shoulder.

We had had an early start, and after lunch, as there was nothing particular going on and we were merely jogging to and fro along the line of nets watching the drifters at work, I had retired to the charthouse for a nap, leaving the officer of the watch in charge on the bridge. There were three of us destroyers in company, the fourth having been detached to chase a mythical submarine.

I knew from the trampling of feet outside that the men had already been summoned to their action stations by the ringing of the alarm gongs, and as I jumped up and scrambled up the steep bridge ladder the rattling of the engine-room telegraphs told me that we were increasing speed.

My first glance was naturally towards the enemy. I could see their slim grey shapes racing through the water with the great plumes

of their white bow-waves falling away on either side of their stems as they drove along at full speed. They were still about 9,000 yards distant, but were steaming directly towards us, and a cursory glance through my binoculars told me that they were large destroyers. It was their obvious intention to attack the drifters at work on the nets; our obvious duty to prevent them.

When the enemy were first seen we happened to be steaming away from them, and for some minutes after my first hurried look I was too busy conning the ship to pay much attention to the Germans, for almost at once our leader, the "Medea," put her helm over and swung round with the spray sweeping over her stern in sheets. We followed her, and the "Melpomene" came astern of us. We were now steaming in the right direction towards the enemy, but the line of explosive nets with a few scattered drifters at work upon them still lay between us and the Germans. We headed straight for the nearest gap to get at them, the great waves under our stems mounting higher and higher as we worked up to our full speed of over thirty knots.

The enemy, meanwhile, seeing us coming, had swung round until they were steaming about south-south-west, parallel with the coast, and, at a range of between 7,000 and 8,000 yards opened fire.

It was a curious sensation to see the orange flashes of their guns rippling down their sides and to know that their guns were being fired at us. I tried to analyse my feelings, but

beyond an intense excitement, a fervent desire to get to close quarters, and annoyance because my pipe tasted horribly foul and would not remain alight, I felt very much the same as ever. My mind, if anything, seemed to be working rather more clearly than usual, but I was so concentrated on keeping station astern of the "Medea" that there was little time to think of much else.

The first hostile salvos* fell into the water with a series of plops a good six hundred yards short. Judging from the size of the splashes the enemy were armed with 4.1 inch guns.

Another ripple of flame and thin clouds of dun-coloured smoke from those rushing grey shapes, and this time, with a whirring and a screeching, mingled with the jarring crash of their explosion, the projectiles fell all round us. The sea seemed suddenly to spout into fountains of spray here, there, and everywhere, some over, some short, some ahead, and some astern. We had not been hit, but the shooting was not to be despised—they had straddled† us with their second salvos.

I began to feel rather uncomfortable, not so much because I was anxious for my own personal safety, but because the ship, seen at close quarters, suddenly seemed to have become very large and very vulnerable.

We were soon passing at full speed through a gap in the nets, and out of the tail of my eye

* Salvo, *i.e.*, an irregular volley when all guns are fired practically simultaneously by order from the control position.

† Straddle, *i.e.*, to drop shell of the same salvo short and over the target, which means that the correct range has been found.

I caught sight of a drifter fifty yards to starboard reeling drunkenly in our heavy wash while her little company waved their caps as we sped past them into action. And once clear of the gap our leader altered course to starboard, until at last we were steaming broadside to broadside with the enemy on a slightly converging course. The range was about 6,500 yards.

I saw the "Medea's" guns burst into flame as she straightened out. We steamed through the dissolving haze of her cordite smoke with the sweet, sickly scent of it in our nostrils, and turning, I nodded to the sub, the gun control officer. He was quite ready.

"All guns—Fire!"

A crash and a jar, a sheet of flame, and the hot stench of burning cordite in our faces.

The enemy's guns were still flashing at regular intervals. The water all round our line vomited fountain after fountain of spray, dazzlingly white, feathery, and beautiful against the blue background of sea and sky. The air reverberated to the heavy, liquid "plop" of falling shell, the metallic jangling sounds of their explosion, the shrill crescendo "WHEEW—WHEEW" as they passed overhead, or the loud purring noise as they struck short and ricocheted through the air without bursting. And with it all came the roar and thunder of our own guns. Then, through the haze of our discharges, I caught sight of shell spouting into the water all round the enemy. It was a tremendous relief.

The full details of that fight were rather lost

on me, for I was too busy with other things. We were in hot action for forty minutes, striving our utmost, using every ounce of steam and every fraction of a knot to close in to decisive range so that every shot would tell. But the enemy, unhappily, were steaming just as fast as we were, and were constantly edging away towards the coast so as to bring us under the fire of those terrible guns ashore. And in this they partially succeeded.

They did not escape scathless, however, for suddenly we saw the crimson sparkle of a shell explosion, a cloud of black smoke, and a rush of steam from the after part of the second destroyer in their line, the one we were firing at. Her speed dropped and her consorts closed and started to circle round her. She was damaged. Our rate of fire redoubled.

By this time we were far inshore of our line of drifters. The sun was behind us, and every detail of the coast was clearly visible to the naked eye—the yellow beaches gleaming in the strong light with the rampart of grassy-topped sand-dunes beyond, the very doors and windows of the buildings at Blankenberghe. Working out our courses and speeds subsequently on the chart I discovered that we must have reached a spot within 10,000 yards of the shore, and how we ever got there without running amok on one of the reputed German minefields is a miracle at which I have never ceased to marvel.

But we had done what we had set out to do. We had prevented the enemy from harrying our drifters, chased them, indeed, right back

to their own harbours. We could do no more. Our helms went over. We started to steam away, and then it was that the fun began.

The batteries must have been waiting for this moment, for hardly had we turned than the whole line of the coast started to blaze and to sparkle with flame. Next a demoniacal shrieking and whistling in the air, and the sea began to spurt with shell splashes. Ten thousand yards—five miles—is a mere nothing for heavy guns mounted ashore and provided with range-finders and scientific contrivances for plastering certain areas with a barrage of shell, and to give the devil his due the German shooting was remarkably accurate.

They were using all sizes of guns from 11 inch down to 5.9's, and it was undoubtedly trying for the nerves to hear the howling, whirring, and whizzing of the shells as they came towards us in droves. I have often heard it said that one cannot hear a shell until it has passed, but it was certainly not true on this occasion. It was more trying still to hear the humming of jagged splinters flying through the air, and to see geysers of all sizes and shapes missing us literally by feet. We knew that if one of those projectiles struck home in a lucky spot and exploded we might be brought to a standstill—helpless under a veritable tornado of fire, and with no alternatives save a sudden death or to end the war in a German prison.

I saw a great gout of water rear itself out of the sea within three feet of our stern. I could have sworn that the flying fragments must have wrecked our steering gear ; but no, they erupted

vertically into the air and the ship still sped on. A huge fountain leapt out of the water under our very bows and cast its shadow across the bridge and forecastle. We actually passed through the waterspout, for suddenly I found myself dripping from water and my nostrils filled with the sickening stench of the explosive. The blue sea was streaked and pockmarked with patches of discoloured water where shell had fallen and burst. They looked exactly as if one had emptied ashes from a bucket. It was supremely exciting, but I cannot pretend that I liked it. Nor did anyone else.

A thudding clang and a quiver warned me that we had been hit somewhere close to the bridge. I waited for what seemed æons for a burst of flame and a shower of splinters—but they never came. Then, happening to look forward, I noticed a ragged hole in the steel deck of the forecastle. The shell had driven its way through the deck and had passed out through the side of the ship about eight feet above the waterline without exploding. It was a "dud," thank goodness!

If the fuze had been up to its work the bows of the ship must have been torn open and the whole of our forecastle gun's crew killed or wounded, while I might not have been writing this. As it was we merely had a large, irregular-shaped hole above the waterline and in line with the bow-wave, which was easily plugged by some long-suffering sailor volunteering his hammock as a temporary leak stopper. Mounted on a mahogany plinth with a brass plate, I still possess a twisted lump of steel carved

out of the deck by the passage of that particular projectile.

The whistling, howling, and screeching continued, while the spray fountains still shot out of the water all round us. Splinters hummed through the air, and with a slight jar and a rat-tat like a door-knocker a small hole suddenly appeared in one of the wooden range-dials projecting outboard from the port side of the bridge.

The top of our bridge was uncovered, and how many shells missed us by feet I cannot say; but suddenly there came vituperant remarks from the coxswain at the wheel.

"God damn those sons of ————!" I heard him exclaim.

As the sailor often relapses into profanity when he is wounded I glanced around in some trepidation, thinking that perhaps a splinter had found a billet in Bewles's stalwart figure. But everything was as it should be. The coxswain was still at the wheel, and his fat red face, streaked with perspiration, was only a little redder than usual. He looked up at me with a smile wrinkling his mouth and winked deliberately.

"Its all right, sir," he explained. "I've only lost me cap! S'trweth, this is no place for a married man!"

It was not a place even for a bachelor, for a sudden rush of heated air from a passing projectile had filched away Bewles's headgear. I do not exaggerate.

It seemed as if we were under fire of the shore batteries for hours, though almost as soon

as the action with the destroyers had ceased and we turned to retire, I had signalled to the engine-room to "Make Smoke." And the people below, realising that their safety depended upon it, did their very utmost. Before long the transparent haze at the summit of each of our three funnels was thickening appreciably, while soon afterwards an impenetrable cloud of inky blackness, so dense and so opaque that it seemed nearly solid, was pouring out of our funnels and rolling away astern.

It undoubtedly saved us from severe punishment, for though we could still hear the whizz and see the splash of an occasional shell, the enemy's gunners could not see us through the dense pall which lay spread out between us and the shore. In a few minutes, indeed, the firing ceased altogether.

We had been in action with the destroyers from 3 o'clock until 3.40. The time was now 3.50.

We steamed on towards the line of drifters, who, quite unconcerned as to what was taking place inshore of them, were still at work. We approached them rapidly, until they were soon within three miles ahead of us. Our next anxiety was to find a gap in the lines of mined nets through which we could pass in safety to the open water beyond.

The "Milne," the fourth destroyer of our division, which, having been detached earlier in the afternoon to search for a submarine, had not taken part in the action, was now steaming rapidly towards us. The hostile fire

had ceased altogether, but we were not out of the mill yet, for it was at this time that we noticed the third ship of our line, the "Melpomene," lagging astern. At first we put it down to some temporary loss of steam in the engine-room which would speedily right itself, and it was not until she made a signal that we learnt she had been badly hit and was in need of assistance.

It afterwards transpired that she had been hit in the engine-room by one of the last shells fired by the German destroyers before we broke off the engagement. The projectile, striking the water first and turning over in its flight, had entered the ship broadside on below the waterline without exploding. If it had burst, the ship would have been doomed, but as it was the sea at once commenced to enter like a mill-race. To check the flow was an absolute impossibility, and within a few minutes the engine-room was full of water and the men were forced to abandon it. This incident had taken place at about 3.40, but for over twenty minutes the ship had still contrived to steam with her turbines first awash and then entirely submerged.

How her engineer officer, Engineer-Lieutenant-Commander (now Engineer-Commander) William H. Clarke, ever managed to perform the miracle is best known to himself. It is a feat which is ordinarily regarded as impossible; but it is enough for me to say that if the "Melpomene" had not continued to steam away she would probably have been sunk while she was still within easy range of the German guns.

In a word, she was saved by the efforts of the officer, petty officers, and men of her engine-room department, and for his excellent work on this occasion Engineer-Lieutenant-Commander Clarke subsequently received the D.S.O. He most richly deserved it.

The "Melpomene's" speed dropped rapidly, until at last she came to a standstill. It was a flat calm day with hardly a ripple, and the "Milne," arriving on the scene, circled round and promptly went alongside the port side of her damaged sister with the idea of taking her in tow.

All the destroyers of the Harwich Force, as a result of sundry mis-adventures in the Heligoland Bight, carried two shackles—25 fathoms—of chain cable on their quarterdecks ready for shackling onto the end of a wire hawser for taking an injured consort in tow. The cable, acting as a spring, lessened the strain on the hawser itself and had proved its utility on many occasions; but this time its use led to a mishap, for in securing it to the hawser led from the "Melpomene's" forecastle, the "Milne" had the evil fortune to drop a loop of the cable over her port propeller, which was still revolving. What happened can be imagined. The cable was caught by one of the blades of the screw which proceeded to coil it round and round the shaft until it was inextricably tied in a tight knot and the propeller could no longer revolve. It was sheer bad luck, but the "Milne" became a lame duck until she could visit a dry-dock to have the tangle removed.

The "Medea," our senior officer, signalling to us to go ahead and to find a way through the barrage of explosive nets, thereupon went alongside the other side of the "Melpomene" to tow her clear. The three ships thus formed a sandwich with the "Melpomene" in the middle.

For perhaps half an hour we steamed slowly ahead, with the three destroyers lashed together following along some distance astern of us. The German destroyers, however, must have been watching our movements, and noticing that one of us was damaged, determined to make another attempt to cut us off, for at about 4.30 we again sighted their low grey hulls and heavy white bow-waves as they steamed full speed towards us from the direction of the land.

My impressions of what followed are a little vague, for in that moment all idea of time seemed to vanish. I remember our making a signal by semaphore to the "Medea"—"The Huns are coming out again"—and the "Medea" replying to us—"Please show us the gap in the nets." I recollect hailing one of the drifters and ascertaining where the gap lay, and then signalling the information to the "Medea."

The next thing was a sparkle of wicked flame from the advancing enemy, then about 8,000 yards astern, and several pillars of feathery spray spurting out of the water all round the three destroyers as they lay locked together.

The boom of the hostile guns came rolling across the water.

My first feeling was one of supreme irritation with the enemy for daring to molest us while we were more or less helpless. Then it flashed through my mind that unless something was done, and done very quickly, the three destroyers astern were in for a very warm time. The only possible thing for us to do to relieve the situation was to turn round, to cut in under their sterns, and, while making a smoke-screen to hide them from view, to do what we could to drive off the enemy. I did not feel very happy about it, for it was a matter of ourselves alone against three until our only undamaged flotilla-mate, the "Medea," could come into action with us.

The helm went over. We jammed the telegraphs onto "Full speed," signalled to the engine-room for smoke and plenty of it, and sped past the "Milne," "Melpomene," and "Medea" at nearly 30 knots as they lay lashed together in a bunch. Our heavy wash caused them considerable inconvenience and carried away not a few of their securing wires, but even as we flashed by two more salvos dropped perilously close alongside them. The Germans had their range exactly, and before long they would hit.

In a few moments we were under their sterns, and straightening out on a south-westerly course we opened fire at the three enemy destroyers, who by this time had approached to within about 6,000 yards. We saw our shell splashes darting out of the sea fairly close to them, and almost at once they turned to a parallel course, in towards the coast, and

transferred their unwelcome attentions to us.

The air again became full of the whinnying and screeching of shell, and it was with a feeling of distinct relief that I saw the " Medea " cast off from the " Melpomene " and steam at full speed into action ahead of us. Two against three was not quite such long odds.

I do not propose to give a detailed account of the action which ensued, but to do the job thoroughly we had to chase the German destroyers as far inshore as we could to give the " Melpomene " and " Milne " a chance of getting clear without further damage. At the beginning of the fight a monitor, the " Prince Eugene," assisted us from outside the barrage by bursting some 12 inch shrapnel over the enemy until they were out of range, but we opened fire at 4.40 and kept it up till 4.55, at distances varying between 5,600 and 8,000 yards. What the result of our shooting was I cannot say for certain, for the Germans were firing heavily at us, but in between the flashes of their guns and the splashes of our shell dropping into the sea all round them, I thought I caught sight of the reddish glare and cloud of black smoke of an occasional hit. Their shooting, however, had deteriorated, for though they fired rapidly they did not hit us.

It was when we turned to come out again, at 4.55, that the shore batteries opened another heavy burst of fire. We zig-zagged this way and that and made our usual smoke-screen, and though we were missed again and again by mere feet, were not hit. The " Medea," however, was not so fortunate, for at about

4.57 I saw a gout of greenish-golden flame and a puff of black, oily smoke go up from her quarterdeck as a shell struck her fair and square. Then another close alongside her foremost funnel. For what seemed an eternity I watched her with my heart in my mouth, thinking that the first shell must inevitably have damaged her steering gear, and that we should have to try to tow her out of action. We were still within easy range of the shore, and if we had had time to make the attempt the chances are that both ships would have been sunk.

But no. To my inexpressible relief she did not wobble in her course. She still steamed on at full speed, and in another seven or eight minutes we were safe.

The "Medea" had been hit three times. A shell, bursting in her wardroom where men were handing up ammunition to the after gun, had killed two men and wounded several more, and had caused considerable damage to her stern while rendering the wardroom itself totally uninhabitable. Forward, where she had been hit again, her side was perforated in places like a nutmeg grater and she had received further internal damage.

As for ourselves, we were merely struck by the single six inch shell during the first phase of the action, and I can only attribute our escape to sheer good luck and to the fact that we were never on the same course for two consecutive moments, for fully five miles of coast had concentrated its guns upon us. Out of the 360 rounds of ammunition we carried

we had fired no less than 230 during the fifty-five minutes we were in action with the destroyers.

So the end of our first day on the Belgian coast, Easter Monday, Bank Holiday, found all four of us temporarily hors-de-combat. The "Melpomene" had to be placed in dock at Dunkerque to be patched up before proceeding to an English dockyard; the "Medea" had to proceed to Chatham to have her damage made good, while the "Milne" had to be put in the floating dock at Dover to have several fathoms of chain cable disentangled from her port propeller. We ourselves had to endure the indignity of a temporary patch over the hole in our bows, a makeshift affair of plating and red-lead which leaked infernally every time we plunged into a head sea until they finally rectified it during our next visit to a dockyard.

Our leader, the commanding officer of the "Medea," subsequently received the D.S.O. for the "dash and gallantry with which he led his division," while of our men the chief engine-room artificer and the coxswain were both awarded Distinguished Service Medals for their excellent work, and one officer and two men were "mentioned in dispatches."

There was always a certain amount of sporting instinct displayed by the German aircraft and naval forces stationed on the Belgian coast.

It is said, with what truth I do not know, that if the enemy succeeded in bringing down one of our machines from one of the aerodromes near Dunkerque, they invariably dropped a

message stating the fact the next time they visited that place. Sometimes it was to the effect that the machine had crashed and the occupants killed, but on more than one occasion, if the story is to be believed, they dropped a bag containing a message to the effect: "Your aeroplane No. was brought down yesterday. Pilot slightly wounded, observer unhurt. They request you will drop their pyjamas and tooth-brushes next time you come our way!"

British and German destroyers, too, while indulging in one of those frequent engagements off the Belgian coast, during which the enemy craft held off at long range and endeavoured to entice our vessels under the fire of the shore batteries, were said sometimes to have engaged each other in conversation by means of their searchlights. The Morse code is common property.

"Come a little nearer, you dirty dog!" the British ship is said to have spelt slowly out.

"Thank you. Not to-day," the enemy replied. "Dirty dog yourself!"

If these signals were made it is only on a par with what happened in East Africa, when, early in the war, the German commandant of one of the fortified coast towns blessed with a harbour made the following wireless signal "en clair*" to the British men-of-war blockading it outside.

"We wish you a merry Christmas" it said. "If you care to visit us we are quite ready for you!"

* "En clair," i.e., in plain language.

History does not relate the British retort.

We spent many weeks on the Belgian coast during 1916-17, and were fired at, bombed by aeroplanes, and engaged by hostile destroyers on various other occasions. But our first introduction to the place will always linger in my memory, for of all our "windy corners" it perhaps was the "windiest."

CHAPTER X

A NEW SHIP

BY May, 1917, having served for nearly two and a half years in the Harwich Force, the destroyer which we had regarded as such an up-to-date creation in 1914 was becoming old. Ships do age rapidly in time of war, and so far as T.B.D.s are concerned, one might almost say that one year's war service is the equivalent of four years of peace. In war-time, moreover, progress is much more rapid and new developments and fittings are constantly being perfected, so that our little ship was rather behind the times.

Early in 1917 all the "M" class destroyers in the Harwich Force were gradually being relieved by newer craft of the "R" type, the former being sent to Dover to release still older destroyers for convoy work which, with the ever increasing severity of the German submarine campaign, was becoming more and more important. And as the Harwich Force destroyers had recently been cut down from two flotillas to one, and Harwich already had more than its full complement of commanders,

all of whom were senior to myself, I had realised for some time that I should probably have to leave. I was therefore not altogether surprised when, without the least warning, I received an appointment to a new destroyer completing on the Clyde. She was, I discovered, to join the 13th Flotilla attached to the Battle Cruiser Force at Rosyth.

I left Harwich with the greatest regret. It was a great wrench leaving a force in which one had served for twenty-eight months, and which was commanded by an officer who had the confidence and personal affection of every officer and man serving under his orders. I bitterly regretted leaving the flotilla, a flotilla in which, through long practice and varied experience, we had all come to know each other like the members of a family. We took an immense pride in ourselves. Not that we considered we were superior to other flotillas, or that we regarded the Harwich Force as the hub of the wheel so far as the Naval war was concerned. The work of no particular destroyer flotilla could be called more important than that of any other, for all of them, and the entire Navy, were striving for one common object. We merely took a pride in ourselves as belonging to the Harwich Force, and the term "esprit de corps," after all, generally walks hand in hand with the "band of brothers" feeling. Our leader, moreover, had the happy knack of getting the best out of his subordinates, and he was utterly fearless himself.

But above all I regretted being parted from

an excellent ship's company which I had learned to love and to trust. We had been through the mill together, and the officers knew their men, and men their officers, in a manner that no five years of peace could have brought about. Punishments were practically unknown, and for the proper understanding of human nature and a true perspective of the admirable qualities of the British bluejacket, nothing can compare with a small ship in time of war. The sharing of trials and dangers goes a great way towards cementing friendships, and my voice was very husky and my heart full of bitterness when I said good-bye to the men.

I tried my utmost to take some of them with me to the new ship, but it could not be arranged. The best I could do was to write a judicious letter asking for certain of the officers, and this, I am thankful to say, partially succeeded, for the first lieutenant, surgeon probationer, and midshipman R.N.V.R. joined the new ship with me.

Altogether I was thoroughly miserable at the thought of leaving Harwich, and the only redeeming feature of my departure was the fact that we were the last "M" class destroyer to leave the Force, and a signal made by the commodore as the old ship—with my relief on board—sailed for Dover.

"To captain, officers, and ship's company. Good-bye. I am very sorry you are leaving the Harwich Force. I wish you the best of luck."

I shall always treasure the signed slip of paper on which those words are written. N

Early in June, having commissioned the new vessel, we found ourselves at Rosyth. We had a completely new ship's company, drawn from the uttermost parts of the world, some of whom had never served in destroyers before. Indeed, the first time we put to sea, in weather which could only be described as delightful, we found at least 25% of the men prostrated with sea-sickness. Most of them soon grew over it, though until I left the ship, over a year later, one of the signalmen invariably appeared with a bucket to keep his watch on the bridge.

Again we found ourselves "shaking down" with a new ship's company and getting them to work together. We encouraged the workers, tamed the ruffians, chivvied the laggards, and initiated into the mysteries of naval life and unaccustomed discipline a considerable number of men who had never seen the sea before. Even before the war, when the fleet reservemen, —ex-seamen—were called up for the annual naval manœuvres, their shore-going occupations were varied and diverse. One cruiser, indeed, is reputed to have steamed into Portland harbour with a postman at the starboard engine-room telegraph, a baker at the wheel, and the man who hanged Crippen twirling the lead in the chains.

The occupations of some of our men were almost as peculiar, for among others we had a house decorator, several farm-hands, three miners, a printer's devil, an architect's assistant, and a coffin maker, who now, through the evil machinations of Messrs. William Hohenzollern and Company, and the difficulty of

providing trained men for a navy which had expanded beyond all recognition, had been sent to us. And the way these men developed and started to pull together after a few weeks of small ship life was nothing short of wonderful. At the end of six months, by which time we had succeeded in eliminating the few square pegs, there was not a single man we would willingly have changed.

As for the ship herself, she was a hybrid, though it is to be hoped she did not suffer from a hybrid's failings. She was an ordinary destroyer, a little faster and a little larger than our previous craft, but otherwise much the same to look at. She carried the usual three 4-inch guns with a two-pounder pom-pom for anti-aircraft work, and the customary two pairs of 21-inch torpedo-tubes. But by the removal of the after gun and pair of tubes and the fitting of mine-rails along the upper deck, she could, when the necessity arose, be converted into a fast mine-layer carrying forty "eggs."

At times we worked with the flotilla as an ordinary destroyer, but for the greater portion of the sixteen months I spent in her we were a minelayer pure and simple. The most interesting period of work in this latter function has been dealt with in another chapter.

Our conversion from one role to the other was generally sudden. On more than one occasion, when at sea with the "Striking Force" of four destroyers off the entrance to the Firth of Forth, we received orders to return to harbour forthwith, complete with oil fuel,

proceed into the basin at Rosyth dockyard, and to convert ourselves with all possible haste into a minelayer.

On our arrival we were hurried into the dockyard and were instantly invaded by a swarm of workmen, who proceeded to change the appearance of the after part of the ship. With cranes they whisked away the after gun and platform and one pair of torpedo tubes, and for the next few hours life was not worth living as they coaxed, hammered, and bolted the mine rails and their supports into their places. In course of time they reduced the job to a fine art, so much so that they could be relied upon to complete it in five or six hours, after which we were bundled out of the dockyard and proceeded up the river to Grangemouth to embark the mines.

As for ourselves, we could take in our forty mines in something under an hour, the job which really took the time being their testing. Allowing for the six hours spent in the dockyard, the time taken in steaming up the river and in entering docks and basins, the interval spent in waiting for the tide at Grangemouth—which we could enter or leave only between two hours on either side of high water on account of our draught—and the time taken to embark and test our cargo, we were generally ready for service within twenty hours of receiving the signal to convert. Then came another trip down the river, the arrival of a secret envelope containing operation or sailing orders, the signal "Prime mines," and away we went.

The first minelaying operation we actually

took part in was one carried out from Dover, in which four of the destroyers—two from Rosyth and two from the Dover Patrol—were required to lay a line of mines in enemy waters within about seven miles of Ostend. The operation took place on the night of July 12th–13th, 1917, and we sallied forth from Dunkerque after dark, attended by a considerable escort of destroyers. If we encountered hostile destroyers, as was quite possible, for Ostend and Zeebrugge were still in German hands and they had a powerful flotilla on the coast, we, the minelayers, were enjoined to leave the fighting to the escort, while we concentrated our energy on planting the mines in their correct position, if it was humanly possible. We were not to fight with our mines aboard unless our ships were actually attacked.

Dunkerque was suffering from its usual air raid as we sailed. Bombs were falling in the town, anti-aircraft guns were thudding and spluttering in all directions, and the Heavens were ablaze with fiery trails as tracer shell drove upwards, and twinkling splashes of ruby light as projectiles burst aloft. There was considerable curiosity among those of our men who had not been in the neighbourhood before, and they clustered on deck enjoying the fun until I ruthlessly ordered them to take cover. They obeyed with some reluctance, until the “hiss-s-s” and “plop” of a piece of shrapnel falling into the water quite close alongside finally convinced them that prevention was better than cure.

And the sight of Nieuport, where the opposing lines joined the sea, was another spectacle which enthralled them. It was the beginning of the great line of trenches stretching through Belgium and France to the Swiss frontier and, as usual, the lower sky was ablaze with the ruddy flashes of guns reflected on the undersides of the low clouds as far as the eye could see inland, and the dazzling white glare of bursting star shell and signal lights curving in their flight as they attained their full brilliance, and waning gradually as they fell to earth. The dull rumble of many guns travelled ceaselessly rearward through the calm night. It had continued for nearly four years. It would continue—how long?

It was no great novelty to me. I knew the Belgian coast of old, and had spent many hours in the old ship patrolling in the vicinity, on the watch for raiding destroyers. So had the first lieutenant. But to most of the men it was something quite new, an aspect of the war they had never encountered before. They began to picture to themselves what it meant to be a soldier, fighting in that vast trench line stretching from Switzerland to the sea, and to realise that life at sea, even in war, has its compensations.

"Poor blighters!" I heard a signalman whisper to the man at the revolution telegraph. "I wouldn't be a soldier no'how!"

I have heard a seasick military officer reciprocate the thought the other way round. It was one of those calm nights with that prevalent thin summer haze creeping sea-

ward from the land. It was not really thick, but objects at a mile were blurred and indistinct, while the low clouds made it unusually dark.

We left the glare of Nieuport behind us, and skirting the banks, steamed on towards our objective. The zero time came, the whole force eased down to twelve knots, and the first destroyer laid the first half of her mines, swung outwards, and disappeared. Numbers two and three followed suit—then came our turn.

“ Lay mines ! ” I ordered.

A splash from aft, as the first “ egg ” dropped into the water.

“ One—two—three—four— ” sang out the officer at the voice-pipe at regular intervals.

“ Fourteen—fifteen — — — ” a lengthy pause.

“ What the deuce has happened ? ” I asked hurriedly, for we had to lay twenty mines, equally spaced, on the first line, and then alter course to starboard and lay the remainder.

“ A mine’s jambed on the rails, sir,” came the reply. “ They’re doing their best to clear it—sixteen ! ”

“ How much longer have we to run before turning ? ” I asked the sub, who was busy with his stop watch.

“ Five seconds, sir.”

“ Oh, hell ! ” I gasped. “ Number One, for Heaven’s sake, rush aft and ginger them up ! I shall turn on time, but we’ll lay the twenty-four on the next lay instead of twenty. It’ll prolong the line a bit, but I can’t help that.”

" Time, sir ! " from the sub-lieutenant, as the first lieutenant left the bridge.

" Hard-a port ! Steer south fifty-six east, coxswain."

The ship slewed round, steadied in the new direction, and the laying recommenced.

The mines seemed to be dropping very irregularly. I discovered afterwards that the hauling-aft motors had not worked altogether satisfactorily, and that the rollers of several mine-sinkers, jamming in a curve on the rails, had necessitated their being dragged and coaxed after by sheer physical labour. In the face of it it does not sound very difficult. But a mine on its sinker weighs nearly half a ton, our men were new to the business, and were working on deck encumbered with obstructions and in pitch darkness. Lights, since we were in enemy waters, were quite out of the question. But still, pulling, hauling, straining, and blaspheming, they got them over somehow.

" Twenty - nine—thirty—thirty - one—thirty-two—thirty-three— " came up the voice-pipe. " Thirty-four—thirty-five—."

" Ships on the port bow, sir ! " came a sudden hail.

There were, for I could see the white bow waves and the dark shapes of two vessels, steaming fast on a course opposite to our own. They would pass us between four and six hundred yards aft.

Our escort had altered course to the westward when we had turned out of the line. We were alone, and the new-comers, from their

position and the course on which they were steaming, could only be one thing—Huns.

Thoughts flashed rapidly through my mind, and I felt hot and cold in turns. We had been ordered not to fight unless forced to, but here we were jogging along at twelve knots with the enemy flashing past us at high speed. It seemed impossible that they could avoid sighting us, though as we were steaming at slow speed, our bow waves could not be so conspicuous as theirs. If they acted together and at once we should be easy meat.

Then I remembered the clause in our orders which said we must make every effort to lay the mines, and my mind was made up.

“Keep your guns trained on them,” I hastily told the first lieutenant. “Don’t open fire unless they do. Have the tubes trained to port.” As luck would have it, our solitary pair of torpedo tubes were pointing to starboard, which we had imagined the most likely direction from which an enemy would appear. With the usual contrariness of things, they had now arrived on the other side.

My heart throbbed as I waited for the crash of the first gun and the whizz of the shell as it drove towards us. The interval between the times those vessels were sighted, flashed past our port beam, and vanished in the darkness on the quarter could only have been a few seconds, but to me it seemed interminable, and staring in the place whence they had disappeared, I could hardly realise that what we had seen was not a mere trick of the imagination.

"Good God! What fools!" ejaculated Number One, his voice full of relief.

"Thank Heaven!" murmured I.

I subsequently took the trouble to visit the ships of our escort, to ascertain if by any chance they had got out of position and had steamed past us at the exact time we were able to give them. None of them had. The strangers were German, and they missed a most glorious opportunity. I can only attribute their failure to molest us to the fact that we were travelling at slow speed direct for Ostend, and that they imagined us to be Germans returning to harbour. They did not even challenge.

As for ourselves, we tumbled the rest of our mines overboard and steamed off at full speed in the direction whence they had vanished, in the hope of finding and of bringing them into action. We had no luck, however. We never sighted them again.

But this was not the final episode of a rather eventful night which will ever stick in my memory. We were supposed to rendezvous with our escort after having laid our mines, but due to the advent of the Huns and the darkness, which had become accentuated by drizzling rain, we never succeeded in finding them. We therefore started to find our way back to Dunkerque independently, and on the way intercepted a wireless signal from our sister ship, the "Tarpon," to say she had been mined, and was badly damaged aft and unable to steam.

There was nothing for us to do, as the

"Tarpon," having laid her mines before us, would be in touch with the destroyers forming the escort; and presently we heard another message by wireless to the effect that a destroyer was actually standing by her and was about to take her in tow.

She eventually reached Dunkerque the next morning with her stern badly mangled and low in the water. There they put her into dock and patched her up to make her sufficiently seaworthy to be towed home to England, but such were her injuries that practically the entire after part of the ship had to be rebuilt, and it was over six months before she finally rejoined us.

The officers, as usual, lost most of their kit, what clothes were not damaged by sea-water being ruined by oil fuel. Their chief complaint, however, was that the wardroom gramophone, an instrument in a rosewood case for which they had paid twenty guineas in Edinburgh, had not proved itself able to withstand the effects of a German mine exploding at close quarters. I had always thought they had been unduly extravagant, and now I was quite certain of it.

As for ourselves, we returned to Rosyth.

CHAPTER XI

ROSYTH AND THE "B.C.F." *

I

THE work of the destroyers attached to the Battle Cruiser Force at Rosyth, though just as important and even more strenuous, was a distinct change to that of the Harwich flotilla.

In the southern area we had frequent trips—sometimes twice a week—between the English and Dutch coasts, convoying mercantile traffic to protect it against submarines and possible destroyer attacks from the hostile bases in Flanders. The work had alternated with expeditions to the Bight for air-raids and reconnaissances, a general watch on the southern portion of the North Sea, and operations against any northward movement on the part of the enemy flotillas at Zeebrugge and Ostend.

Though affiliated to the Grand Fleet, we rarely saw it, while it was hardly within the bounds of possibility that the Harwich Force would be able to arrive on the scene in time to participate in any Fleet action very far north. To our everlasting regret, we had not taken part

* "B.C.F." Battle Cruiser Force.

in the Battle of Jutland, though the Harwich Force was represented at the engagement by four of its destroyers which happened to be at Rosyth when the battle-cruisers sailed. There was doubtless some very good reason for our not being permitted to proceed post-haste to the northward in the hope of arriving on the scene in time to assist the already depleted northern flotilla in their furious night attacks on the retiring enemy; but as it was, we eventually left harbour during the afternoon on which the battle was fought, and saw nothing but the "Marlborough," which we happened to pass the next morning on her way home after having been torpedoed. Our faces were very glum and tempers rather sour for some considerable time afterwards.

At Rosyth, since we belonged to the Battle Cruiser Force, which was part and parcel of the Grand Fleet which was occasionally in the Firth of Forth, though more usually at Scapa Flow, there was always the probability that we should be in any Fleet action that took place.

There was always plenty of work for destroyers, and quite apart from the more important operations for which we invariably accompanied the larger ships as a submarine screen, the light cruisers and ourselves were for ever doing odd jobs of our own in the shape of "sweeps" across the North Sea. We were kept hard at it, and often and often it was a case of coming into harbour after three or four days at sea, completing with oil fuel, securing to one's buoy the last thing at night, receiving

a signal to raise steam at 1 a.m., sailing orders an hour later, followed by a hurried exodus at cockcrow.

At times, when things were unusually strenuous, it was the exception to have an uninterrupted day in harbour. If there was nothing else to be done, there was always the "Dark Night Patrol," in which, during the moonless period, a light cruiser and a couple of destroyers cruised from sunset to sunrise, to seaward of the Firth of Forth, to guard against any attempt on the part of the enemy to lay mines from surface craft in the approaches to our base. There was also the "Striking Force" of four destroyers which were out for forty-eight hours at a time, two remaining at anchor in Largo or Aberlady Bay, and the others patrolling in the entrance to the Firth or escorting the coastal convoys. Any spare time we had, which was not often, was generally fully occupied in gunnery and torpedo exercises.

When in harbour, I believe, the big ships were generally at three or four hours' notice for steam, which meant that a certain proportion of the officers could visit Edinburgh during the afternoons, provided they visited the North British Hotel at periodical intervals to enquire if they had been recalled. We destroyers, however, had to precede the big ships out of harbour if the occasion arose, and were consequently at shorter notice for steam, with the result that few of us felt really comfortable if we were more than half-an-hour's travel from our ships. For myself, I never went into Edinburgh unless we were

"boiler cleaning" alongside the depot ship, which meant that I had at least eight hours before the ship could possibly be ready to sail. I could have gone more frequently, but the idea of spending the afternoon glued to the end of a telephone, with the perpetual feeling that something might be happening in one's absence, and that the ship might have sailed before one's return, was too repugnant to be considered.

Most of the destroyer officers who were married had houses or rooms at South Queensferry, and such houses and rooms some of them were! Bed-sitting-rooms were fashionable; two rooms in an "apartment house" with no attendance palatial, and a house of one's own, however decrepit, positive luxury. The prices, too, were ruinous, and landlords, landladies, and tradesmen evidently judged the length of a naval officer's purse by the amount of gold lace he wore upon his sleeves. But people were lucky to get accommodation at any price, and if by any chance a rumour got about that Mrs. So-and-So was leaving, or that Commander Thingumbob was shortly being appointed elsewhere, there was always a queue waiting on the doorstep.

Our weather in the northern portion of the North Sea was quite different to that we had experienced further south with the Harwich Force. Both localities could be equally nasty. It was only in the nature of their nastiness that they varied.

In the shallower water down south we had those frequent and prolonged south-westerly

gales which brought in their train a confused, tumbling sea which, short and steep, imparted an abrupt, jerky movement to destroyers which was most unpleasant. The gales came suddenly, often for no apparent rhyme or reason, with no marked change in the barometer, and with nothing to herald their approach save a peculiar leaden heaviness in the western sky. Strong easterly winds were the exception rather than the rule, but these, since they brought the sea astern of us for the homeward journey, we did not really dislike. It was always some comfort to scud back to one's base after an operation with a gale of wind from astern helping one home.

In the deeper and more open expanse between the Firth of Forth and the Skagerrak, the Shetlands, and the coast of Norway, strong winds and a heavy sea were apt to come from any direction. The south-westerly gales were bad, but these from the north and north-west, sweeping straight down from the Arctic Circle and bringing with them those huge, leaden-coloured white-caps, were the ones we most cordially detested. Compared with them the tumbling lop of the southern area was puny and insignificant. These northern seas were regularly spaced hillocks of water, each tipped with its welter of frothy white, rolling down upon us in rhythmical, orderly cadence. The term "mountainous" as applied to the sea is often misused, but those great masses towered high above our bridges and decks as we sunk into the hollows between them. They were veritable mountains to us.

The battleships and battle cruisers seemed to plough stolidly through them without turning a hair. They wallowed along, rolling ponderously, with occasional whiffs of spray flying over their forecastles and quarter-decks. I doubt if those on their bridges had even to wear oilskins. The light cruisers were lively and wet, dancing along with their mastheads tracing wild arcs across the grey sky, their sharp bows dipping under water, green seas sluicing aft along their forecastles, and bridges and funnels sometimes obscured in sheets of wind-flung spray.

But the destroyers—oh, Heaven !

Sometimes, when we rolled forty-five degrees either way, and our bows lifted on the back of some huge sea, until the keel was visible from stem to bridge, when they fell again into a liquid valley and the stern lifted dizzily until the propellers raced madly in the air, when great seas broke onboard everywhere until there was no dry spot in the ship, and we were dog-tired, wet through, and chilled to the bone, with hot food at a discount—then it was that we almost envied those in the battleships. But I don't think any of us would willingly have changed places if it had really come to the point.

There is something exhilarating in destroyer life, even in the fiercest of weather ; to feel the slender hull lifting to the rush of the surges, throbbing to the steady thrust of the turbines, and to realise that the enormous energy of 30,000 horse-power—greater than that of many battleships—is penned up in a vessel under

three hundred feet long, with sides little stouter than thick cardboard. To me, any ship is a sentient being, but a destroyer, perhaps because she is small, seems more sentient than them all. She is very responsive. She has an individuality of her own, and though at times she may be fractious and contrary, generally because it is we who have mismanaged her, it is the handling of the ship, the coaxing, the humouring, and, if necessary, the driving of her, wherein lie the chief joys of one's existence.

Although perhaps the enemy did not live so near to our front-door as he did at Harwich, life in the destroyers of the Battle Cruiser Force was far too busy to be dull. I remember the occasion when, with a light cruiser squadron, we suddenly put to sea at seven o'clock one evening in the midst of a bitter north-easter. We had sailing orders which told us that the force would rendezvous in a certain position well over the other side at such and such a time the next morning, but unbeknown to us, the rendezvous was altered before we had reached the Fidra Gap, the opening in the outer submarine defences between Elie and Fidra Island.

It was a very dark night, with driving squalls of rain which obliterated everything. We joined our light cruisers off Inchkeith, and steamed on at twenty-two knots with their dim blue stern lights glimmering ahead of us. Our first misadventure was an altercation with the submarine defences mentioned above, for, following in the wake of the cruisers, we

suddenly saw a line of large buoys a bare hundred feet ahead. The light cruisers had evidently crashed through them and the connecting wire hawsers with wire anti-submarine nets hanging from them; but where a three-thousand-ton ship may go with impunity a destroyer cannot always follow. At the speed we were travelling there was no time to do anything. We could not check the ship or turn clear; there was nothing for it but to go on and trust to luck that we should pass through the gap that the cruisers had already carved. I had visions of our projecting propellers and rudder being torn off, or, as a lesser evil, fathoms of steel wire rope wrapping themselves round the former and so bringing us to a standstill—but nothing happened. There was a slight thump, the crack of a parting hawser, and we steamed on—undamaged. That was the first incident.

As we came into the more open portion of the Firth the sea gradually became worse, so that we had great difficulty in keeping touch with the cruisers ahead, whose pale stern lights were all but invisible as they dipped into the seas and sheets of spray swept over us. Save one destroyer, which was zealously dogging our footsteps, all the others seemed to have vanished. What had become of them we did not know, for though we flashed astern again and again to tell them we were in touch, no answer was forthcoming. Possibly they had received other orders, but as we were in touch with the cruisers, we determined to hang on to them like grim death.

Alas for our good intentions!

By the time we arrived abreast of May Island we were getting the full brunt of the sea, and began to make such heavy weather of it that there was danger of damaging the ship. People who force their destroyers into the teeth of a gale and have to retire to a dockyard to make good defects are not thanked by their superior officers, and there was nothing for it but to make a signal to the cruisers, telling them we could not maintain a speed of twenty-two knots in the prevailing conditions. We flashed again and again, but no acknowledgment was forthcoming, probably because our signal was unreadable in the spray flying over the bridge. There were strict orders against the use of wireless. Then the cruisers' lights disappeared altogether and we were lost. With the other destroyer we steamed on for twenty minutes, hoping to sight them again—we did not.

The crashing and thumping was becoming worse every minute. Great seas came leaping over the forecastle to erupt against the bridge, until the whole structure swayed under the tremendous buffets and we could scarcely stand upright. The whole ship shook and trembled—I took the law into my own hands, informed our solitary consort, and eased to eighteen knots.

A quarter of an hour later we had another adventure, for peeling ahead through the spray and rain, we suddenly saw the black shape of another destroyer travelling to the northward. She was on our starboard bow, steaming with-

out lights and barely a hundred yards distant. My heart stood still. A collision seemed inevitable, and a collision in such a sea as was running at the time could only end in disaster for both of us. I tremble to think of what might have happened.

Our helm went over, our lights blazed out, and our syren screeched frantically. The ship, bless her, turned like an angel. She seemed to be aware that something was wrong, and we slithered past that destroyer's bows by a bare fifty feet. It is one of the narrowest escapes I have ever had.

We discovered later that she was one of the "River" class destroyers escorting a large convoy of merchant ships to the northward. In other words, a convoy of anything up to thirty vessels without lights was proceeding across the entrance to the Firth of Forth when light cruiser squadrons and destroyer flotillas, also without lights, were putting to sea. It was blowing hard and raining, while the visibility was a bare quarter of a mile, sometimes less. It was asking for trouble, and it was only by the mercy of Providence that a horrible catastrophe, or a series of them, did not take place in the blackness of that night.

The pair of us steamed on. We had a terrible night, and when the dawn broke grey and misty there was nothing in sight, nothing except the huge, leaden-coloured surges rolling down upon us from the north-eastward. It was still blowing as furiously as ever.

We held a semaphore conversation with our mate to decide what had better be done. With

the reduction in speed it was impossible to reach the rendezvous by the proper time, and should we hold on in the hope of finding the light cruisers, or turn back in the chance of finding the other destroyers astern of us? We knew from the hastiness of our departure that this was no ordinary "stunt." To judge from various indications, and the long coded wireless signals which we could not decipher made by various shore stations, the enemy were at sea.

The rendezvous, as a matter of fact, had been shifted thirty miles to the northward without our knowledge, and if we had sighted nothing and had gone there, we should have found ourselves alone and quite unaware of what was happening.

However, we were still talking to each other, when the mist lifted momentarily, and we saw a light cruiser about two miles ahead steering in the same direction as ourselves. We altered course for her thankfully, flashed the "challenge" on our searchlight and were duly answered, exchanged numbers, and discovered, to our relief, that she was one of the squadron we had lost during the night.

"Where is the flagship?" we asked.

"Five miles on my starboard beam," she answered.

So away we went to join the admiral.

"What has become of the other destroyers?" he asked when we had exchanged numbers.

"Have seen nothing of them since passing Fidra Gap," we said.

"I consider you have done well to keep up

in this weather," came the cheering rejoinder. "Take station five cables on my starboard bow and send your mate to join cruiser on my port beam. Take your time. Do not force your ships to get into station."

Done well, indeed! It was the merest fluke that we had ever found him, and if the light cruisers themselves had not been compelled to ease down on account of the sea, we never should have.

But the little pat on the back was very encouraging, and would that more officers understood what it means to a destroyer to get an occasional congratulatory signal instead of the more frequent "You are ahead of bearing," or "Get out of my way." A little praise, judiciously given, is wonderfully effective.

But we loved that particular admiral. He was always so sympathetic and considerate to the destroyers attached to him, and always seemed to understand our difficulties. Years before he had served in a destroyer himself.

The indecipherable wireless signals were still coming through throughout the afternoon, and soon after noon, by which time we were somewhere in the neighbourhood of the North Dogger Bank lightship, well over towards the Danish coast, the cruisers, which had been spread in line abreast, started to concentrate and our number went up at the flagship's yard arm.

"Take your other destroyer, remain in the vicinity of North Dogger Bank lightship, but out of sight of it, and keep a look out for enemy minelayers and report if sighted. Cruisers

will be spread fifteen miles apart between North Dogger and Hantsholm.* Four other destroyers have been ordered to join you," her semaphore spelled out.

"Is there any further news of enemy?" we asked.

"Have given you all the information I have," was the answer.

The weather had improved a little and the visibility had increased, and soon afterwards, when the lightship had been sighted, the cruisers disappeared on the horizon to the eastward and left us to our own devices. I was sorry to see them go, for with them we felt happy, without them, rather forlorn and neglected.

But no hostile minelayers came our way, and at about five o'clock in the afternoon we received the rather welcome wireless signal "Return to base." So we returned at a fair twenty-three knots with wind and sea astern of us.

It was not until some time afterwards that we discovered that the enemy minelayers were the "Brummer" and "Bremse," light cruisers with a reputed speed of thirty-six knots and armed with 5.9 inch guns. Our speed, all out, was perhaps thirty-four and a bit.

2

Among other excursions in which we took part from Rosyth was one known as the "H.S. Operation." If "H.S." signified "High Sea,"

* A point on the Danish coast in latitude 57° 10' N. longitude, 10° 40' E. approximately.

its title was eminently suitable, for during the fortnight or so the business lasted the weather was positively pestilential.

Briefly, the idea was to stretch a line of anti-submarine explosive nets some 20 or 25 miles long across the track generally followed by the "U" boats proceeding to and from Germany *via* the north. The area selected was in the middle of the North Sea about halfway across between the Firth of Forth and the Skaw, that finger-shaped promontory at the northern end of Denmark which marks the line of demarcation between the Skaggerak and the Kattegat. The nets themselves were to be laid by drifters and watched by destroyers, while considerable forces of destroyers to deal with submarines on the surface were stationed some distance to the north and south. We were one of the craft watching the nets.

While this operation lasted we worked in two reliefs on a four days' cycle—four days on patrol followed by four days nominally in harbour. If the weather had been good it would have been nothing particularly strenuous, but as it was it blew hard throughout the entire period, so that no small portion of our "stand off" was spent in steaming the 240 odd miles between Rosyth and the scene of activity.

The weather was vile, blowing hard from the N.N.W. with a sea so big that we could steam no more than eight knots against it. It was bad enough for us, but for the little drifters marking the ends of the nets it must have been little short of purgatory. For the whole of one day we were employed spreading out oil on the

water to windward of one poor little craft tugging viciously at her riding wire with clouds of spray flying over her. At times, when she sank into hollows between the seas, she vanished completely, so much so that, on occasion after occasion, we held our breath, thinking that some particularly vicious brute of a sea had overwhelmed her and sent her to the bottom. But each time, when we had almost given up hope and were contemplating having to rescue the survivors, she bobbed up again, serene and smiling.

We had always admired the men of the auxiliary patrol, stout British fishermen commanded by their own skippers or ex-Mercantile Marine officers with temporary commissions in the Royal Naval Reserve. Their work during the war needs no pen of mine to extol it. Their cheerfulness, their dogged persistence, their seamanship, and their astounding bravery have been described by weightier writers than myself, but if anything did increase our respect and admiration, it was the manner in which that little drifter hung on in the face of that howling sea.

"Can you hold on?" we asked anxiously, knowing full well that if her thin wire cable parted we should have considerable difficulty in locating the end of the line of nets.

"We are doing our best," came the answer by semaphore from a figure perched on the roof of her tiny wheelhouse. "Ship is plunging badly and wire may part, but we are steaming ahead slow to ease the strain."

"Hang on all you know," we replied. "We

are going to windward, and will pump out oil to prevent the seas breaking. Hope it will help you."

"Thank you," she said.

When, after an hour's experimenting with dribbling oil fuel overboard, we again asked her how she was getting on, she became more cheerful.

"Things are much better," she told us. "Think we shall be able to hang on."

So we continued to spread the tax-payers' money over the face of the raging ocean. Oil fuel, I believe, costs something over a hundred shillings a ton, but not a drop of it was wasted on this occasion. The drifter hung on.

The "H.S. Operation," unpleasant though it certainly was to us, was infinitely more so from the point of view of one or two "U" boats which did not return to Germany. We had heard several muffled explosions at the time, and subsequent information proved that they were not without result.

Another "stunt," which at the time we fervently hoped would be fruitful, was an expedition on the part of the light cruisers and a flotilla of destroyers into the Kattegat. We had heard that many light cruisers and destroyers had constantly been seen in that locality, and as we were to go south as far as the northern ends of the Belts and Sound, the entrances to the Baltic, we expected to have a chance of "mopping up" something. Our battle cruisers, moreover, were to cruise about off the Jutland coast until we re-emerged into the North Sea, which told us that there was

a possibility that the enemy might send a force north from their North Sea ports to intercept us on our return.

We passed the Skaw in the early hours of the morning with our men at action stations, and altered course to the northward. When the dawn came we were midway between the islands of Laeso and Anholt, but though there were several ships in sight, which we examined, they were all obvious neutrals. Reaching Anholt, we separated, one party proceeding to the entrance to the Sound, and the other, which included ourselves, to the Great Belt. It was a grey, hazy morning, with a slight breeze and a visibility of perhaps three miles. At any moment we expected to see the shapes of German light-cruisers or destroyers looming up through the mist ; but luck was not on our side—the southern portion of the Kattegat, within forty miles of German bases in the Baltic, was as innocent of the Hun as was the North Sea itself. All we found was a solitary German fishing trawler on our return journey, the crew of which was removed and the vessel herself sunk.

The eastern party, however, had slightly more luck, for off the Kullen, the promontory at the northern end of the Swedish side of the Sound, they came across a large German steamer heavily armed as an auxiliary. This vessel, on sighting our cruisers and destroyers, took them for friends, and at once hoisted her colours, whereupon a shot was fired across her bows to bring her to.

She still continued to steam away, and fire

was at once opened upon her, to which she did not reply. She was armed with four 5·9-inch guns, and could have put up quite a good fight against our destroyers, but did nothing—her guns were still swathed in their canvas covers, so safe did she imagine herself.

After a few rounds had been fired, a lucky shell burst in one of her magazines. There was a slight explosion, whereupon the Germans, leaving the ship to her fate, lowered every boat that they possessed, and abandoned her. The vessel was sunk and the survivors of her crew made prisoners, complaining bitterly of the dastardly conduct of the British on opening fire before they had a chance of defending themselves.

The Hun is ever an innocent creature when he is caught with his boots off!

It was not the glorious “mop up” we had all expected. Our total bag was only the auxiliary cruiser and one trawler—but it was better than nothing.

The only other occasion on which we were in direct contact with the enemy was on November 17th, 1917, when a party consisting of light cruisers and destroyers met a bunch of German light cruisers and mine-sweepers about sixty miles north-west of Heligoland. Contact was made shortly before 7.30 a.m., and the Huns, as usual, made off to the eastward at full speed, with our light cruisers and destroyers in full cry after them.

It was really a drawn battle, for though ships on both sides were badly hit and suffered casualties, no vessel was sunk, with the ex-

ception of one enemy outpost boat. Torpedoes were flying about in all directions, the Germans, during their retreat, loosing off every " mouldy " they possessed.

We ourselves were with the battle cruisers some little distance to the westward of where the engagement started, but in sight of it, and to judge from the way that torpedo-tracks were whitening the sea here, there, and everywhere, we had evidently walked bare-footed into a veritable nest of submarines. Most of the battle cruisers had narrow escapes, but luckily not one of them was hit. It was a near thing, however.

We had the honour of finishing off the solitary patrol boat, the " Kehdingen," which had been fired upon by the advanced destroyers in passing. She was a heavily armed craft with three respectable-sized guns, and a submerged torpedo-tube in the bows, but when we approached her she was already out of action and most of her crew had taken to the water. We accordingly rescued the survivors, several of whom were hideously wounded, and polished off the ship by firing a few shells into her at close range.

The Germans, I may say, were extremely grateful for their treatment while they were aboard us. Indeed, before they left, a petty officer asked to see me, and, with tears in his eyes and sincerity in his voice, thanked us warmly for saving the lives of himself and the others. He was rather surprised, he added, that we had taken the trouble to rescue them, and could not altogether understand why we

had not opened fire with machine guns while they were in the water !

The affair of November 17th might easily have developed into another Jutland, as our battleships were close by and at one time there were indications that a considerable German battle-fleet was coming out to drive us out. We hung about for nearly twenty-four hours, hoping against hope that they would appear, but, as usual, nothing happened.

The Hun was terribly coy about showing himself abroad, and though we spent much time, energy, and money in rattling the knocker on his front-door, he rarely gave us a run for our money. It is to be presumed he imagined that we always had something up our sleeve to annoy him if he did come to sea. Sometimes we had, and sometimes we hadn't. We would willingly have given him an opportunity of making certain.

CHAPTER XII

A WINTER JOURNEY

I

THE only officer in the wardroom really awake was the midshipman R.N.V.R., who, permeated by his sense of zeal, was seated at the table industriously writing up the fair log. The first lieutenant, with his sea-booted legs stretched out before the glowing stove, his cap cocked over one eye, and a pipe dropping from the corner of his mouth, dozed blissfully in an armchair. The surgeon probationer made no bones about it at all, for, covered with a rug, he reclined at length upon the cushioned settee running along the ship's side underneath the scuttles. He held a book in his fingers, but his eyes were tight shut. His mouth was wide open. Presently he would be snoring.

As for myself, the most elderly member of the party, I occupied the other armchair near the stove, and was drowsily debating in my mind whether or not to follow the example of the engineer lieutenant commander, the sub-lieutenant, and the gunner, and to forsake the warmth and comfort of the wardroom

for the bunk in my cabin further forward. There was an intolerable "fug" in the ward-room, what with the tight shut scuttles, the tobacco smoke, and indefinable odours of food from the pantry outside. The atmosphere could almost be cut with a knife, but I could hear the wind howling in the stove pipe. It was freezing on deck. I felt quite happy where I was.

The month was January. The time, about 1.30 in the afternoon, but there was some excuse for our somnolence. The ship had arrived in harbour at seven o'clock that morning, after eight and forty hours' buffetting at sea; and at sea in war-time, as everybody knows, few people in destroyers get much rest. And after nearly three and a half years of it, during which we had spent three-quarters of our days and more than half our nights wallowing about the ocean in all weathers, we had long since achieved the art of slumbering in the daytime. Our steward, too, had the reputation of being one of the best in the flotilla, and we had lunched sufficiently.

The weather was as bad as it possibly could be. The Firth of Forth, in winter, is never a delectable spot, but on this particular day, what with a strong north-westerly breeze and occasional heavy squalls of sleet, so thick that they even obscured the great skeleton shape of the Forth Bridge three quarters of a mile down-stream, it more than upheld its reputation. The ebb was making fast, and the leaden-grey waters of the river were whipped into waves which broke over our low deck in

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showers of spray as the ship jerked and strained at her buoy.

For us, with nothing but a small motor-boat and a whaler, communication with the shore or with another ship was quite out of the question. Even the battleship's picket-boats were dipping their bows under and were hurling the spray high over their funnel tops, as they steamed past us on their way from Hawes Pier with their postmen and stewards.

The little aneroid on the bulkhead in the lobby outside the wardroom seemed to have developed a mysterious leak. The mercury had been falling steadily for thirty-six hours, but still continued to fall, until even our most ancient mariner, a grey-headed able seaman quartermaster, sucked his teeth in astonishment, and confessed he had never seen "the likes of it."

The only thing to be thankful for was the fact that we were not at sea.

I presently found myself yawning as I lay back in my chair. My thoughts started to wander incoherently. My pipe dropped from my mouth. I dozed. I slept.

2

"Cap'ten, sir," murmured a voice.

I opened one eye, to see an oil-skinned figure, dripping with wet, standing at my elbow. It held a signal pad in its hand.

"Won't it keep?" I asked, recognising one of the signalmen and imagining that the message he brought was unimportant—something to the effect, for instance, that the weekly

return of Roman Catholics, Wesleyans, and Presbyterians borne on the ship's books had not been rendered, or else that the quarterly statement of ammunition expended was long overdue. I had a guilty conscience. I knew my paper-work was hopelessly behindhand, while the depot ship had an unpleasant habit of calling attention to the fact whenever we returned into harbour, and always just as I had composed myself to slumber.

"It's urgent, sir," the man answered. "From Captain (D.)* Prepare for sea. Raise steam by five-thirty. Sailing orders are being sent!"

I groaned inwardly and kicked the first lieutenant, who merely grunted.

"Is it to the whole flotilla, to our division, or to this ship alone?" I asked the signalman.

"This ship only, sir."

"All right, Pyke. Tell the engineer officer and all the usual people."

The man left the wardroom, while I repeated the attack on my long-suffering subordinate.

"Wake up, you fat-headed blighter!" I implored him, placing my foot in his lap.

"Ugh!" he yawned, opening his eyes and stretching himself. "What's up now? Is it tea-time?"

"Tea-time be jiggered! We've orders to raise steam and prepare for sea by five-thirty. It's nearly three o'clock now."

"Stunt, sir?" he enquired, sitting up, and beginning to show more interest. "Or has another submarine been sighted off May Island?"

* The captain in command of a destroyer flotilla.

"Neither," said I. "If it were, it would be 'Raise steam with all despatch and report when ready.' Besides, the signal's made to us alone, and they're sending sailing orders."

"That means the refit for a dead snip, then," said Number One with an air of finality. "We're ten weeks overdue already." I agreed.

"I should like to know where we're going, though," I went on. "Five-thirty's a peculiar time to sail, if it's Leith or the Tyne."

"Floating dock at Cromarty, perhaps," the first lieutenant suggested. "It might even be Chatham."

"I'll bet my bottom dollar it's the last place we expect," I answered. "I've made arrangements to spend my leave in the north of England, and I'll bet you what you like we go south once more, just to give me a longer railway journey."

Even as I spoke there came a sound of splashing outside and the tinkle of an engine-room bell. Then a shadow passing the scuttle, the thrashing of a propeller as it drove astern, and a thud as the boat rubbed alongside.

"Sailing orders," we said together.

A few moments later the quartermaster came down the ladder and handed me a sodden envelope. I tore it open impatiently.

"Being in all respects ready for sea," said the contents, in the usual curt, official phraseology, "H.M. Ship under your command will slip at 5.30 p.m. and proceed to Avonmouth to refit, arriving there during the forenoon of January 9th. You will proceed Northabout. Route orders herewith. Acknowledge."

"Avonmouth!" I gasped. "Of all the damned places!"

"Northabout!" echoed the first lieutenant, peering over my shoulder.

Of all the places they could possibly have chosen for our refit, Avonmouth was about the most distant, for it lies at the head of the Bristol Channel, about halfway round England and Scotland from the Firth of Forth. Indeed, on measuring it on the chart we found that the distance *via* the east coast and English Channel was about 750 miles, and by the north and west coasts of Scotland and the Irish Sea, about sixty miles less.

"My aunt!" murmured the surgeon probationer, who had been listening to our conversation. "Won't we just get a hell of a dusting in the Pentland Firth with this little breeze blowing!"

He merely echoed my thoughts. I did not at all relish the prospect.

3

At 5.30, by which time it was quite dark, we slipped from our buoy in the midst of a blinding snow flurry, and felt our way cautiously down the river past the remainder of the flotilla, as they lay at their moorings.

"Bon voyage. Wish you a pleasant leave," winked our particular "chummy ship," as we slid past her within a hundred feet.

"Many thanks. Good luck to you," we answered.

We steamed on under the great arch of the Forth Bridge, with its white, red, and white

lights glimmering overhead to show that the inner anti-submarine net had been lowered for our passage ; on, past a line of winking buoys to starboard, to where two trawlers marked the southern entrance of the inner boom. In due course we sighted their red and green lights, passed between them, to leave the little craft rocking uneasily in our wash, and shaped course for the outer gate. We slid through this, and twenty minutes later, having increased to 20 knots, were abeam of Inchkeith, whose blinking searchlight peremptorily demanded our name and business.

In another hour and a quarter we were passing May Island, whose light was exhibited for our especial benefit. We fixed our position accurately, steamed on for a mile or two, and then altered course to the northward up the coast. Our journey had started.

In the palmy days of peace navigating at night up or down the east coast of the British Isles is even easier than it is during the daytime. In daylight it is always possible to mistake one headland, or one lighthouse or lightship, for another, particularly at a distance ; but at night, when the lights themselves are showing, and they vary one from the other in the period and number of their occultations and flashes, any error is much less likely. But ever since the early days of the war, all the lights on the east coast had been extinguished, as they assisted hostile submarines in their minelaying and other devilment on the coastwise traffic routes. The lights, if required by ships proceeding up and

down the coast at night, could be exhibited for certain periods, provided several hours' notice had been given by wireless, though in destroyers, where we were sometimes forced to reduce speed on account of unexpected bad weather, and where our navigational facilities on a spray-swept bridge in the dark were never of the best, it was often very difficult to adhere to a hard and fast time-table arranged beforehand.

On one occasion we had left the Firth of Forth after dark with orders to proceed to the Humber with all possible speed. The weather was very hazy, and we steamed down the coast at 25 knots, but, in a run of something over two hundred miles, we sighted nothing at all between St. Abb's Head, at the entrance to the Firth of Forth, and the light vessel off the Humber entrance early the next morning.

But on this particular occasion I foresaw no great difficulty in this respect. We had a clear run before us with no outlying dangers beyond the Bell Rock, while we had asked for Girdleness, Rattray Head, and Kinnaird Head lights at certain times, allowing for a speed of 20 knots. We were anxious to make good time for the first lap of the journey, for we should be running along within fifteen or twenty miles of the coast, where, with the wind between north-north-west and north-east, we should be more or less under the lee of the land where the sea could have no real malice in it. Once past Kinnaird Head, in the wide open stretch of water off the Cromarty Firth, we might expect worse weather, so were prepared for a

substantial reduction in speed with the idea of making the land in the neighbourhood of Duncansby Head, at the eastern entrance to the Pentland Firth, soon after daylight at about 8 o'clock.

For the first portion of the trip the weather, beyond being bitterly cold, was not really bad. It was uncomfortable, of course, for the thermometer was well down below freezing-point, while the spray, driving across the fore-castle in sheets, froze as it fell, so that mast, bridge, and rigging were soon festooned in icicles. We also had occasional heavy snow squalls, so what with these and the spray, we on the bridge were soon in our usual condition of being wet through and numb with cold, in spite of oilskins and sea-boots. But the sea itself was not really vicious. The ship was not bumping heavily into it, and we were long since used to being wet.

We sighted the welcome beam of the Girdleness light at 11 o'clock, were abeam of Rattray Head an hour and a half later, and of Kin-naird Head at about one fifteen in the morning.

Once out from under the lee of the land, the sea became heavier and steeper, and the ship began to tumble about as only a destroyer can. It was a pitching and a rolling combined, a violent disconcerting corkscrew motion, which made it very difficult to steer a steady course, and practically impossible to stand upright on the reeling bridge without holding on with both hands. We had eased to fourteen knots, but even at this moderate speed the ship flung her stern clean out of the water, so that at times

the propellers raced wildly in the air. At one moment we could feel the bows lifting dizzily on the back of some mighty comber, then an appreciable pause, as she hung there poised, followed by a sickening descent into the succeeding hollow. Next a thudding, quivering jar, as she took the water again—and a wall of greyish water, tipped with yeasty white, rearing itself in front of the bows. A crash as the sea broke on board, and came surging aft, feet deep, along the forecastle, to expend its energy against the charthouse underneath the bridge, which shook and trembled to the trip-hammer blows.

At times we received a substantial portion of the seas on the bridge itself, the weight of solid water nearly knocking the weather-screens flat, and literally battering the breath from our bodies. Always we had the spray, wind-driven spray, in sheets which came hurtling over bridge and funnels, and stung our faces like hail if we were unwise enough to expose them. And above the swishing and thunder of the breaking seas came the eerie screeching of the wind as it howled through our scanty rigging overhead. One instinctively judges the strength of the wind by ear, and this time, if my sense of hearing was not at fault, it was blowing a full gale.

Ahead the sea was faintly luminous, for I could see nothing but a confused, leaping maelstrom of bluish-white, and the foaming summits of the nearer waves as they drove towards us. Looking aft, the upper deck seemed buried in a white-grey welter, as the

seas leapt bodily on board and went sweeping aft in a cataract. Funnels, torpedo davits, and other deck fittings stood up out of the frothing turmoil like crags in the bed of a mountain torrent.

The dead weight of water, and those terrible blows as the bows fell, seemed literally to stop the ship dead as she plunged and wallowed. She reminded me of a labouring horse. I could feel her straining, quivering and bending, and was fully alive to the fact that a prolonged struggle, if we persisted in forcing her, could only result in leaky seams and rivets, and other worse damage.

"I'm going to ease to twelve knots!" I bawled in the first lieutenant's ear, as the ship yawed wildly and a vicious beast of a sea reared itself up out of the darkness alongside the bridge and came crashing on board by the foremost funnel, almost filching the whaler from its davits.

He nodded in comprehension, and waiting for a lull, I darted for the engine-room telegraph and transmitted the necessary order.

The motion at once became easier and the thudding less frequent, but even so, it was still too bad.

"We'll try her at ten!" I howled at my companion, twisting the telegraph handle again.

"Yes," he shouted back. "She still seems to be knocking her guts out!"

His remark was more expressive than polite, but I could not help being amused; for, knowing the ship's company as I did, I was well aware that quite 60% of them must also be

suffering from acute internal disorder. I had only to look at Pyke, the pale-faced signalman, who, crouching down under the bridge screen beside me, obviously did not care whether it was Christmas or Easter, to visualize the condition of affairs in the foetid, sloppy fore-castle with its congregation of suffering humanity.

There is always something pathetic in the sight of a seasick sailor, but Pyke was guaranteed to be ill in the finest weather. He was even worse than a certain sub-lieutenant R.N.R. they once sent us, who never appeared on the bridge to keep his watch without making tender enquiries as to the exact whereabouts of the nearest bucket.

But at ten knots there was a distinct change for the better, for the wild plunging and thudding subsided, and the ship rode over the seas instead of driving through them.

"Hope to goodness there are no submarines about!" I yelled to the first lieutenant.

"Hope to Heaven there aren't!" he answered. "Anyhow they wouldn't be able to do much in this sea!"

I daresay he was right, though I should have taken no risks if the weather had allowed it. Ten knots makes a vessel too easy a target, even at night.

I waited for some time, to satisfy myself that the ship really was making better weather of it, and then turned to go below to the chart-house.

"Let me know if there's any appreciable change in the weather," I called to the first lieutenant. "Keep her on the same course

at the same speed, and have me called at six-thirty."

"Aye, aye, sir. Good night."

"Good-night," indeed! I could see myself having a good night, with the ship bucking like a broncho.

I clambered down the ladder, and made my way in through the lee door of the chart-house, to find the usual scene of desolation. The violent movement had filched every moveable fitting from its place, and had hurled it ruthlessly to the deck. Despite an ingenious arrangement of lamp-wicks and cigarette-tins designed by myself, a trickle of water still dripped steadily from a faulty voice-pipe connection in the roof onto the cushioned settee which served as my bed, while the weather door, though nominally water-tight, admitted streams of water every time the spray came swishing across the bows. The drawers underneath the mahogany chart-table running athwartships along the foremost bulkhead had burst their fastenings with the weight of the bulky chart folios, and were slowly disgorging their contents on to the floor. As for the deck itself, it was utterly beyond redemption, littered with débris of every kind in a horrible mélange—charts, documents, books, and bound volumes of Sailing Directions sliding dismally to and fro with the heavy rolling, and slowly becoming pulped and unrecognisable in six inches of dirty water. Bottles of red, black, and blue drawing ink, with the stoppers out, played leap-frog. A broken cup and the fragments of a saucer; a tin of biscuits with the lid off;

my spare muffler and a pair of rubber sea-boots ; compasses and parallel rulers ; pens and pencils ; the sub's sextant—all scurried to and fro in a furious game of touch-last on the floor. It was a disgusting sight.

I was tired and very wet, and contented myself with salving the more valuable articles and wedging them firmly in place. This done, I removed my dripping oilskins and sodden muffler, attired myself for slumber in a moderately dry "lammy coat" and tapped on the little square window giving access to the wireless room abaft the charthouse.

It opened, to disclose the shiny red face of Biddle, the leading telegraphist, with a pair of telephone receivers clipped on over his ears. At the same time it emitted a gust of warm air, in which I could detect the unmistakable odours of overheated humanity and damp serge, mingled with the acrid scent of the cigarettes he affected. How the solitary occupant could exist in such an atmosphere without being seasick was always beyond me. His den was about six square feet, littered all over with mysterious instruments of his calling, and with sufficient space on the floor for a chair and a box for confidential books. Biddle was never much of a believer in fresh air, even in the finest weather when he could keep his ventilators open, but now, in a gale of wind, with the ship pitching and rolling drunkenly, he was hermetically sealed in his cubby-hole like a lobster in its tin, literally stewing in his own juice, with all the electric lights blazing and the radiator switched on. He

seemed positively to enjoy what is popularly known as "fug" for he throve, grew fat, and maintained a healthy appetite.

"Aren't you rather stuffy in there?" I ventured, as Biddle's fat face, with its pair of twinkling brown eyes, bushy eyebrows, bristling hair, and unshaven blue chin, showed in the opening like a picture in its frame.

"Stuffy, sir! Oh no, sir. It's just nice and snug."

I sniffed dubiously. The temperature inside must have been well over 100, while the trickles of perspiration were slowly coursing down his cheeks. And Biddle, though well covered by nature—positively bulbous, in fact—was wearing a duffle coat, muffler, and goodness only knows what in the way of flannel cholera belts and woollen undergarments.

"Has anything been coming through?" I enquired.

"No, sir. Nothing much been going on. Some of the destroyer patrols in the Pentland Firth have been reporting very bad weather, but that's all."

I groaned, for in a few hours we ourselves would be traversing the self-same area.

"Have they been ordered to return to base?"

"Oh no, sir," with the least suspicion of a smile. "The C. in C.'s told 'em to report if it gets any worse."

So I wished him good-night, and laid down on the settee, covered with my oilskin. I did not spend a very agreeable night.

CHAPTER XIII

THE JOURNEY RESUMED

I

A GREY sky laden with dark snow clouds scurrying down from windward, pierced by occasional gleams of wintry sunlight. A wind-swept waste of leaden water streaked with white, tumbling and playing confusedly.

There was no ordered direction in the breaking seas, no regular cadence in their movement. They rose and fell haphazardly from all points of the compass, rose perpendicularly, toppled over, and fell, each in its smother of yeasty white. At times the waves, rearing their ragged heads aloft, charged furiously together like butting rams, while the spray of their impact went hurtling to leeward in sheets of flying spume and spindrift. The gale still howled dismally, and the strength of the wind, if anything, had increased.

We were entering the Pentland Firth, and land lay on both sides. On the starboard bow, within a mile or two, was the rocky islet of Swona, its dark, rugged mass veined with the snow lying in the more sheltered gullies,

its low summit covered with a mantle of white, and the surges frothing tumultuously round its rock-fringed base. Beyond, from right ahead to well abaft the starboard beam, were the southern islands of the Orkney group guarding the great expanse of Scapa Flow. Through glasses one could see a thin film of smoke from distant funnels, and the slender outline of masts peering over the lower hills ; for inside, in the landlocked anchorage, was the far northern base of the great Grand Fleet.

The hills looked bleak, wind-swept, and barren. There was none of the gorgeous purple and green colouring of the summer heather, merely line upon line of white-capped hummocks fading into the dim distance, hills of a faint bluish-grey fading monotonously into a nondescript dirty brown, streaked here and there with lying snow. The mountains of the island of Hoy, fine on the starboard bow, loomed vague and indistinct in the greyness as their whitened summits were touched by errant gleams of watery sunshine, but at times their contour disappeared altogether in dense snow flurries driving down from the northward.

On our port bow lay Stroma, with the lighthouse at its northern extremity, while beyond, and terminating to the westward in the bold, dark mass of Dunnet Head, lay the mainland of Scotland. The wind-lashed water surged madly against the rock-studded base of the cliff-edged coast.

It was a wintry scene, a wild, forbidding spectacle in which the white passion of the gale seemed to blend austere-ly with the rugged

majesty of cliff and rock. It was typical of the everlasting battle of nature, the ceaseless struggle of wind and water against dry land.

The Pentland Firth has always had an evil name among sailors. Its tides are strong and uncertain, its eddies and currents pitfalls for the unwary; so much so, that even great battleships, mastodons of 25,000 tons, have suddenly found themselves caught in a swirl for no apparent rhyme or reason, and swung through a right angle or more out of their course.

But in heavyweather its dangers are magnified a thousandfold, for the wind, blowing against the stream—which sometimes runs at ten knots—raises a heavy, toppling sea sufficient to overwhelm an ill-found vessel. It is confused and irregular, so that there is no avoiding it by ordinary seamanship, and many a destroyer has limped into Scapa Flow with her bridge knocked flat, with deck fittings, and possibly men, washed overboard. Even battleships have suffered, and one, struggling to the westward against a strong gale, had her bridge completely removed by an enormous wave which broke on board in a liquid avalanche, and flooded the ship with hundreds of tons of water.

We had increased speed at daylight on drawing in under the lee of the land, and it was in my mind to push on as fast as possible during the day, so as to arrive before dark at Loch Ewe, some fifty miles from Cape Wrath down the west coast of Scotland. In January in these northern latitudes it is dark by four o'clock in the afternoon, and as the passage

down the west coast is by no means easy, I had no wish to tempt Providence by attempting it by night with few lights to help us. Moreover, if we spent a night in harbour, a luxury for which we all longed, it would still leave us ample time to reach our destination by the proper date.

In the confused welter of the Pentland Firth we were able to steam 20 knots without much inconvenience beyond deluging ourselves in spray, but once out of the lee of the Orkneys the character of the sea changed rapidly, and we came in for the full brunt of the gale with all the breadth of the northern ocean behind it. We were steaming to the westward towards Cape Wrath with wind and sea slightly before the starboard beam, and so far as movement goes we had never before experienced anything to equal it. We were forced to reduce from twenty knots to fifteen, from fifteen to twelve, but even so, the ship was rolling as much as 50° to leeward and yawed wildly in her course.

As for the sea itself, it could only be described as terrific, great mountains of grey water topped with white, which seemed to reach as high as our masthead as we sank into the troughs between them. So steep were the waves, that the ship, borne skywards on a crest, leant over on her side, and seemed to slide bodily down the next abyss. Sometimes, as a giant sea caught the bows and drove her off her course, the forecastle buried itself deep in the water, the stern was poised in mid-air with rudder and screws useless, while the midship

portion, supported on the crest of the comber, would be overwhelmed in a cataract ten feet deep. Then, as the sea drove ahead and the bows lifted dizzily, the stern fell into a hollow, and we were "pooped" by the next wave, which broke bodily on board over the quarter-deck in a liquid avalanche.

We were battened down fore and aft. Lifelines were rigged along the deck, but even so it was only possible to get from aft forward, or vice versa, by watching for a lull in the seas and taking the risk of being washed overboard. And if anyone had gone overside, we should have been unable to lower a boat. We should have to essay picking him up from the ship herself.

So long as we could keep the sea on the beam and prevent the ship yawing, affairs were more or less satisfactory, for beyond her terrible rolling she rode over most of the waves and we received nothing more than an occasional mass of heavy water amidships. But the moment the stern lifted and the rudder became useless, there was no holding her. She was here, there, and everywhere. The sea had already made a clean sweep of the canopies over the wardroom and cabin hatches in the stern, canvas erections on a framing of brass and stout timber. It had first flattened them to the deck, and then whisked them overboard, and I had no wish to see the flimsy circular hatches collapsing under the weight of water, and all the stern compartments flooded.

The quartermaster was doing his utmost

to keep the ship on her course. His wheel was never still, but he was wet through and numb with cold, and keeping a destroyer steady by compass, with those pounding buffets on bow and stern, while standing on a reeling bridge where one had to hold on with both hands to remain upright at all, was sufficient to try the patience of an archbishop. Steering is always a trying task in a small ship, and ever since commissioning we had had a scheme whereby the men should take two hour tricks at the wheel, instead of the customary four. But even two hours were too long in these circumstances, so while the bad weather lasted we arranged to reduce the period by a half.

As we could not increase our speed without seriously risking the safety of the ship, it was manifestly impossible for us to arrive at Loch Ewe before dark. Moreover, there was absolutely no prospect of any improvement in the weather, for the glass had fallen to an alarming degree, while in the north the winter gales frequently blew for days on end. In the circumstances there were three courses of action open to us.

First, we might return to Scapa Flow and remain there until the weather moderated. It would certainly be the most comfortable course to pursue but there was always the possibility of our being delayed for days, in which case we could not arrive at our destination up to time. Second, we might remain at sea all night, whilst steaming to the northward down the west coast of Scotland. This I was un-

willing to do on account of the bad weather, the extinction of most of the shore lights, and the consequent difficulty of accurate navigation. Our route orders laid down definite positions through which we should pass, involving frequent alterations of course, and a further glance at the chart with its forbidding-looking clusters of rock between Lewis and Skye, only strengthened my determination not to attempt it. Third, we might anchor for the night in some sheltered haven which we could reach before dark. This was obviously the most desirable solution, and the only question that remained was to decide upon the place which should have the honour of accommodating us.

The nearest anchorage down the coast from Cape Wrath was in Loch Inchar, a narrow fiord about four miles long. "*The loch is little used, partly in consequence of the entrance being difficult to make out from seaward,*" said the Sailing Directions, rather pessimistically. Moreover, it appeared that the average width of the loch was a little more than three cables—600 yards—while within half a mile of the entrance, almost in mid-channel, lay the Bodha Ceann na Saile, a submerged rocky ledge with a least depth of 12 feet. Our ship drew 14½ feet of water, so on the whole Loch Inchar did not sound particularly enticing. But it provided a good sheltered anchorage further up which should be unaffected by any wind that blew. It was literally the only port in a storm, so we made up our minds for it, and the sooner we got there the better.

On we plunged towards Cape Wrath, rolling and pitching drunkenly, hurled about like a shuttlecock in the great seas, wet through, and supremely miserable. To add to our discomfiture, we had frequent squalls of snow, so thick that they shut down the visibility to a few hundred yards. At times, between the flurries, we could see the coast on our port hand, with its dark cliffs showing sombre and threatening against the snow-covered mountains beyond, and the waves breaking in white, insensate passion against its sea-edge.

The distance from the Pentland Firth to Cape Wrath is a bare sixty miles, a mere *souppçon* for a destroyer in ordinary weather. But on this occasion I think it was the longest sixty miles I have ever travelled.

The galley fire had been extinguished by a heavy sea, so that hot food was out of the question, and when I enquired as to what arrangements had been made about the men's mid-day meal, I was informed that the greater number of them desired no sustenance at all—they merely wished to lie down and die. We contrived hot cocoa and sandwiches for the remainder, sandwiches with a slab of bully beef jammed between two slices of bread an inch thick, and with this and their rum ration they became slightly more cheerful. As for my own lunch, which I consumed on the bridge, it consisted of slightly thinner sandwiches well seasoned with salt water. But if the truth must be told, none of us felt much inclined for food, though we were thankful at the prospect of being in harbour during the afternoon. There

if the sea had spared our crockery, we could eat, drink, and be merry to our heart's content.

It was not until half-past two that we eventually sighted the irregular hummock of Cape Wrath with the white lighthouse on its summit. Our spirits revived. The Cape marked the turning point in our journey, and once past it our alteration of course to the southward with only ten more miles to go would bring the wind and sea astern, and make the motion easier.

I have rarely seen a spectacle to compare with that of the seas breaking against the bold headland as we approached it. A great hillock of water would hurl itself at the rocky base of the sheer cliffs, to break in an upheaval which dashed the spray a full hundred feet into the air. The body of the wave, recoiling seaward after its fruitless effort to breach the solid rock, would impact against the next sea, with the consequence that, for fully half a mile from the coast, there was a fringe of whitened, wind-ripped water, tumbling, leaping, and playing madly. It was an awe-inspiring but a fascinating scene, a sight I shall never forget, but I could not help thinking of the awful fate in store for any unfortunate vessel which ran ashore on that iron-bound coast. No wonder some ancient mariner, clawing round the promontory in his mediæval, unmanageable sailing-ship, named it Cape Wrath. The name seemed singularly appropriate.

"Cape Wrath abeam one and a quarter miles, sir," said the first lieutenant, gripping the binnacle as he looked along the compass.

"Right," said I. "Bring her slowly round to south sixty-five west. Not too much helm."

"Starboard ten," he ordered.

"Starboard ten it is, sir," repeated the quartermaster, putting the helm over.

I looked anxiously aft as the ship turned, for the alteration of course would bring her stern swinging in to the sea, and there was every prospect of her being "pooped."

We were halfway round to the new course before anything happened. Then as the bows lifted on the back of a big wave, I saw the after part sink into a deep hollow, while a mighty wall of grey water, steep and sheer like a precipice, reared itself up astern and started to overtake us. For one or two breathless moments I saw its foaming crest overtopping the quarterdeck by fully twenty feet. It came nearer and nearer—would the stern never rise?

I felt the bows descending as the sea supporting them drove ahead, while the other end of the ship began to lift ever so slowly. But it was too late. The curling summit was already hanging over the quarterdeck, and the next instant it broke on board with a crash which set the whole ship quivering.

For what seemed minutes the after part remained buried in the heart of the sea. All I saw of the stern was the jigger-mast standing up out of a whitened turmoil, and I prayed fervently in my heart that no living soul had been on the quarterdeck when the wave overwhelmed it. If anybody was there, he must inevitably have been swept overboard.

Then the stern rose dizzily, and as the ship

rolled the water went pouring off the deck in a miniature Niagara.

"Lord!" I exclaimed to the first lieutenant. "If we get another one like that, it'll burst in the after hatches and fill up all the stern compartments."

Number One nodded gloomily. He knew what it meant, for on previous occasions we had returned to harbour after bad weather at sea, to find the wardroom and cabins feet deep in water.

"Shove her on at fifteen knots," I said. "It'll make steering more difficult, but it will prevent the seas overtaking us."

The engine-room telegraph gong clanged.

The ship yawed frightfully. She lurched wildly this way and that, burying her fore-castle deeply as we overtook the combers, but the increase in speed certainly saved us from being badly "pooped" again.

The coast, with its peculiar reddish cliffs and the waves breaking at their base, was only a couple of miles to port. We passed a ten-fathom patch on which the seas, checked in their stride, broke in a furious maelstrom of leaping water; passed Bulgie Island, its low, rounded summit almost obliterated in sheets of flying spume.

But we had not very much further to go, and about half-an-hour later we had altered course towards the coast and were steaming by *Eilean an Roin at the entrance to Loch Inchar. Once under its lee the sea started to subside, and a few minutes later we were

* i.e., "Island of the Seals."

travelling up a narrow fiord with snow-covered hills on either side. The wind, ripping down the gullies in furious blasts, sent the powdery snow flying fantastically in all directions, but in the sheltered loch the water was only ruffled as the squalls came driving towards us. The wild motion had gone. We had finished for the time with the awful pitching, lurching, and rolling in the turmoil outside ; and I, for one, was supremely thankful.

We steamed on, hugging the shore on the port hand, to avoid the rocks in mid-channel. We passed two little clusters of small houses, their roofs covered with snow, and looking for all the world like a picture on a Christmas card. The ship's company revived one by one and appeared on deck. They rubbed their eyes, blinked, and looked about them, and before long cigarettes and pipes were in full blast, sure sign that the men were feeling happier.

A boatswain's pipe twittered shrilly.

" Ha-ands bring ship to an anchor ! "

The men needed no encouragement. The announcement was greeted with a cheer, and I heard ribald remarks as the forepart made their way on to the forecastle.

" Are you all ready ? " I hailed the first lieutenant, as we reached the anchorage and circled round to bring the ship head to wind.

" All ready, sir. "

" Stop both "—I ordered. " Let go ! "

The anchor fell with a splash and a cheerful rattle of cable. The engines went astern to check the way.

"Give her four shackles*,” said I.

"Ship's† got her cable, sir!" a few minutes later. "Fourth shackle awash!"

"Right," I answered.‡ "Bowse to!"

I turned to leave the bridge, but halfway down the ladder was smitten with an idea, and called to the coxswain.

"Sir?"

"Issue an extra rum ration at supper-time."

He raised his eyebrows in astonishment.

"Extra rum ration, sir!" he started to expostulate. "We can't"

"I know exactly what you're going to say, Miles, and it's not the slightest use your saying it," I broke in. "That rum ration is to be whacked out to all hands, and I will sign for its issue. If the victualling people raise any bones about it later on, you can tell 'em to come and see me, and I'll either send 'em away with a flea in their ears, or else pay for the stuff myself. Whack it out with hot water and sugar, if the men prefer it that way. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Miles, not at all displeased. "Thank you, sir."

The coxswain was not a teetotaler.

I walked aft towards my cabin with the idea of removing my sodden clothes and of having

* One shackle equals a length of cable of $12\frac{1}{2}$ fathoms.

† A ship is said to have "got" her cable when the latter is stretched out taut along the bottom, and the vessel is riding by her anchor and not by a bight of cable.

‡ i.e., to secure or nip the cable in the navel pipe through which it passes on deck from the cable locker. It is done by means of a compressor, a steel bar working horizontally and pivoted at one end, which is "bowsed" by means of a tackle against the flat part of one link, and so prevents the rounded edge of the next link from passing.

a hot bath ; but the moment I saw the stern at close quarters I knew the worst.

The sea which had overtaken us had carried away most of the movable deck fittings, and had even wrenched the after binnacle and compass from where it had been bolted rigidly to the deck, and had hurled it overboard. It had bent the after hatches until they were no longer watertight. The water had found its way below, and the wardroom, two feet deep, was a scene of utter chaos.

I swallowed some raw whisky and retired to my cabin in the next compartment forward, but found it even worse. My steward was busy with a bucket and my best bath sponge, trying to compete with the flood, but he seemed to be making very little impression on it. It was a labour of Hercules, rather like trying to empty a swimming-bath with a teacup.

All my most treasured possessions, typewriter, books and manuscripts, had been hurled higgledy-piggledy to the deck, and were either floating or well saturated. The drawers in my writing-table had burst open, and added to the litter. Most of the clothes from the drawers underneath the bunk had joined forces on the floor, while even the bunk itself was wet through with water slopping over it as the ship rolled.

It was a dismal and forbidding scene. Who would not sell a commodious country residence and go to sea ? Who would not write books, when they saw the typescript thereof, the fruit of many hours' labour, floating in eight inches of water ?

I got my bath two hours later, but as the

thermometer was well below freezing, and I had been wet through to the skin for many hours, I did not escape a raging cold in the head, which lasted me throughout the whole of my ten days' leave. As for my typewriter, it has never been quite the same since.

2

At eight o'clock the next morning we weighed anchor and resumed our journey to the southward. The weather was still bitterly cold, with frequent squalls of heavy snow, while, on getting outside the sheltered loch, we found the gale still blowing furiously from the north.

But what did we care? We were fortified after our night's rest. The worst part of our journey was already over, and we had little to fear, running down the coast with wind and sea at our tail. The prospect of leave was uppermost in our minds, and when, between the snow flurries, the sun shone out in a pale blue sky, we felt positively cheerful.

Course was shaped to the southward at twenty knots, and by 11.30 we were steaming down the Inner Sound between Raasay and the mainland, with the hills on either side. To starboard, the rugged, snowclad mountains of Skye shimmered silver-blue and golden in the sunlight, as if cast in solid ice. Dwarfed by the distance, they reminded me irresistibly of a picture of the great Antarctic ice barrier, but soon we left them astern as we steamed through the narrow channel of Kyle Akin, and altered course down Sleat Sound.

It is hardly necessary to describe in detail

the remainder of the journey. By 2.30 we had rounded Ardnamurchan Point and were abreast of Tobermory on our way down the Sound of Mull. Inside the little harbour, the final resting-place of a storm battered Armada galleon, was a small convoy of colliers, oil-fuel carriers, and storeships, on their way up to the Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow. They lay at anchor, a couple of grey destroyers with them acting the part of watch-dogs, and had been ordered to wait there partly on account of the weather, and partly because enemy submarines, driven from the open sea by the gale, had been reported in the more sheltered waters of the Minches between the outer Hebrides and the mainland.

The rest of our journey was uneventful, and by 9.30 the same evening we were abreast of Rathlin Island. The pilotage down the Irish Sea was a decided change from that on the east coast, for all the shore lights and lightships were burning, and one by one they winked cheerfully at us over the horizon on both sides, drew abeam, and then, having served their purpose, faded away astern.

Soon after eleven we exchanged signals with a solitary destroyer butting against the sea on her way to Buncrana. Little did we suspect that, within three or four hours of our passing her, every soul on board that vessel would have served their last commission. She was the "Racoon," and early the next morning, in the pitch darkness and the driving snow, she struck the rocks on the northern Irish coast within a few miles of her destination.

The gale was still blowing furiously. The ship was dashed to pieces against the iron-bound shore, and not a man survived to tell the tale.

It was one of those tragedies brought about by the inevitable conditions in which ships have to work in war, and only those who have been down to the sea in ships can visualise what occurred.

Imagine the little ship pitching and tumbling, groping her way slowly towards land in a blinding snow squall, with officers and look-outs on the bridge vainly endeavouring to see ahead. Though it was anxious work, those on board probably had little doubt in their minds that fortune would favour them, and that within an hour or two they would be safely at anchor. They had worked under war conditions for so long, had had so many narrow shaves of being torpedoed, mined, collided with, or running ashore, that, like other sailors, they were probably born optimists, convinced that, if any catastrophe happened, it would not be to them.

But on this occasion fate ruled otherwise.

The deeper blur of a wall of rock suddenly loomed up in the darkness ahead. An agonised howl from the men on the look-out, and the clang of the engine-room telegraphs as they were whirled madly over to "Full astern"—too late.

A grinding, splintering thud which tore the bottom out of the ship, as she crashed home, lifted on a giant sea, and crashed again. A huge wave breaking on board and sweeping men and deck fittings into the sea. Another,

another, and yet another, and then a sickening lurch as the ship was hurled broadside on to the rocks. She had struck in a spot where she was in the full fury of the gale, and the seas, knowing no mercy, made a clean breach over her as they raced madly shorewards and started to pound the frail hull into fragments.

We shall never know the details of the desperate fight for their lives on the part of that gallant little company, or of how, with their ship riven asunder beneath their feet, they found themselves filched one by one from their precarious hand-holds, and swept into the angry maw of the raging sea. Those who have watched waves breaking against a rocky coast during a gale can picture the scene, and the utter hopelessness of it. Some men may have been mercifully drowned at once. Others, breathless, torn, and bleeding, may have reached the cruel rocks in safety, only to have been pounded to death by the pitiless sea. A few, tossed to and fro among those sharp fangs, mangled and battered, may have struggled for minutes, their agonised cries for help ascending to Heaven, until the breath left their bodies, and they gave up the fight—then merciful oblivion, and the waves playing cruelly with the pitiful human flotsam.

"One of H.M. destroyers was wrecked off the north coast of Ireland," said the newspapers. *"It is regretted that there were no survivors. All the next of kin have been informed."*

And people in England reading the morning's news over their breakfast tables, sighed.

"Another destroyer gone," they may have

remarked. "Poor devils! It must have been in that gale last Wednesday."

But what of those whose future lay in the "Racoon?"

Some hundred odd wives and sweet-hearts, together with parents who had lost their sons, wept for a space, and then went silently about their business, with grief and sorrow in their hearts. They, rather than those who had perished, had made the supreme sacrifice. For months, with smiling lips, they had dreaded the thing which had now come to pass. It is the women of Britain, rather than those who have fallen, who have borne the mental anxiety of the war. It is easy to die, but not so easy to exist when those who were their dearest and best were no longer here to help and to comfort them.

But the price of Admiralty must be paid. It was the evil fortune of war; and on this occasion, as on many others, the gallant dead had given their lives for their country as gloriously as those who have fallen in the shock and thunder of battle.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BLUEJACKET

I

“ANY advance on thirteen bob?” demanded the coxswain, standing on the midship gun platform and holding aloft a crumpled seaman’s collar of blue jean with its three rows of thin white tape. “Come on, now. Keep the pot a’boiling! Thirteen’s an unlucky number. An excellent dicky in tip-top condition. Do with a wash, perhaps, but otherwise. . . .”

“Make it fourteen,” interrupted a leading seaman.

“And a tanner!” persisted the original bidder.

“Fifteen!”

“And a tanner!” again.

“Fifteen and sixpence I’m offered for this excellent dicky,” the amateur auctioneer continued, eyeing the crowd around him. “Now what about a bid from some of you whose kits aren’t complete? Don’t none of you want”

“Sixteen bob!” grunted the leading seaman.

"And a tanner!" came the invariable retort from the petty officer. "Look here, Nutty," he added, turning on his rival in mock dismay. "If you goes runnin' me up much more I'll be broke!"

"Seventeen thillings!" 'Nutty' flung back.

"You can have it my son," grinned the P.O. "I can't afford more. I've already paid fourteen bob for an old flannel* what isn't fit for makin' dish cloths. You must be a blinkin' millionaire the way you're goin' on!"

"Any advance on seventeen shillings?" broke in the salesman. "Going for seventeen bob, this excellent dicky. Going!—Going!—Gone!—For seventeen shillings to Leading Seaman Jephson."

"You'll have to change me a Bradbury, cox'n," murmured the buyer, lifting the waist of his jumper and fumbling in a pocket of the thick flannel cholera belt he wore round his waist.

"Change you a fiver if you like," said the auctioneer, sucking his pencil and marking the price on his paper.

"And you can put it up again," Jephson continued. "I only ran it up for a bit of sport."

"Right you are, my son," the coxswain agreed, receiving the £1 note and handing out three shillings change from the china bowl at his feet. "You can buy it again if you like."

"Now gentlemen," he went on, selecting another article from the pathetic little pile beside him. "The next thing we have is a

* i.e., the sailor's white flannel shirt.

remarkably fine clothes brush. He's a bit worn about the bristles, but otherwise quite sound. You can't buy this sort of article nowadays, I'll guarantee"

"A bob!" said a blushing ordinary seaman, almost afraid of hearing his voice.

"Two bob!"

"Three!"

"And a tanner!"

"Three and nine!"

"Make it four!"

"Ten!" came a voice from the back of the crowd.

"Ten shillings bid by the engineer-loo'-tenant commander!" the coxswain shouted, amidst a twitter of applause from the men.

"Make it twelve!" said the sub-lieutenant.

"That's right!" Jephson murmured. "Now we'll see some sport!"

"Fourteen shillings!" from the "chief."

"Sixteen," retaliated the sub, not to be outdone.

"Seventeen!" The first lieutenant this time.

"Nineteen," said the engineer officer.

"Make it a pound!" said Number One, "I'll be shot if I'm going to be done in by you, Chief!"

"A guinea!" the sub exclaimed.

"Twenty-one bob!" Jephson observed in amazement. "Strike me blooming well pink! Have they all gone barmy, or what?"

"Twenty-two shillings," the first lieutenant bid.

The clothes brush, a most disreputable thing

of its kind, was eventually knocked down to the engineer officer for twenty-six shillings, and was promptly handed back to be resold.

It was the dinner hour. The men had just been paid, and the opportunity had been seized when they were comparatively "flush" with money of disposing of the kit of James Cogan, late Able Seaman R.N., and popularly known as "Shorty."

The whole ship's company were present, and all the officers. The sale had been unusually brisk, as the heaped up pile of silver in the coxswain's bowl together with a good number of £1 and ten shilling notes amply testified.

Now Cogan had gone west a fortnight before—washed overboard at sea in a gale of wind. For over half an hour the ship had searched for him, men straining their eyes as they gazed across the waste of foaming whitecaps, hoping, praying in their hearts that the lift of a sea would bring their shipmate into view.

But Cogan had gone for ever. Perhaps, in falling overboard, he had knocked his head and become unconscious. More likely, weighted with oilskin and heavy leather sea-boots, he had sunk at once to his last long sleep in the grey, heaving bosom of the North Sea he knew so well. He was never seen again, and the destroyer, giving up her task as hopeless, sped off to the westward in the teeth of the gale to rejoin her flotilla. The hearts of her officers and men were heavy, for Cogan, one of the best and cheeriest of men in the ship, was a married man with a family.

Another life had gone to swell the price of

Admiralty. Another widow mourned the loss of her breadwinner.

The usual notice, headed "Accidentally drowned," had appeared in the newspapers, the customary official telegram had been sent by the Admiralty "regretting to inform" Mrs. Cogan "with the deepest sympathy" that her husband had joined the great throng of those who had given their lives in the country's service.

A less stereotyped letter of condolence, genuine in its true feeling, had been written to the widow by the destroyer's commanding officer. It was a little difficult to write, and he tore up many sheets of paper before completing the final draft, but Cogan, he told her, was one of his best men, a shipmate whom they had all loved and trusted, and on behalf of the officers and ship's company he offered their most heartfelt sympathy. The next part of the letter had been more difficult to word tactfully. What the writer was anxious to know was whether Mrs. Cogan was in actual want, what he actually asked was whether there was any little thing they could do for her, any little assistance they could give.

The widow replied gratefully, saying there was nothing she wanted but some memento of her husband, something that he had used. She did not take the lieutenant-commander's hint; said nothing of her financial condition.

Perhaps she was too proud.

But the commanding officer, after consulting with various members of the ship's company, was not quite satisfied. He wrote to the police,

asking them to ascertain the name and address of the clergyman in whose parish Mrs. Coglan lived. The information was forthcoming, and on the priest being written to it was discovered that the widow was in very needy circumstances with four children. A fifth was expected.

"She is very brave," the letter added, "and after the event she contemplates going into service again. I fear, however, that in these bad times she will have great difficulty in making two ends meet if she is to bring up her children respectably. If it were possible for you and your men to help her with a little subscription it would assist her to tide over the present until she gets some sort of pension from the Government. She is very loath to accept money, but if I approach her tactfully I think I could induce her to take it."

The immediate result of that letter had been an instant grant of £20 unanimously voted by the ship's company out of their "canteen fund," usually applied to the purchase of boots and coloured shirts for the football team, and musical instruments and costumes for the "funny party."

Another result had been the auction of Coglan's effects, where men, whose average wages were under half a crown a day, had purchased things they had no possible use for, had cheerfully paid the money, and had then put the articles up for sale again.

Jephson, for instance, had paid seventeen shillings for a collar worth eighteen pence, but not content with that, had given it back, to be resold for five shillings. A pair of boots

with the uppers gaping from the soles had gone for eight shillings ; a pair of woollen under garments for sixteen.

The ditty box of the dead man, together with his little personal treasures and his medal for service in the Persian Gulf, had been carefully sealed and forwarded to the Admiralty for conveyance to the next of kin. Pitiful little treasures they were—photographs of his wife as a girl, and of his children ; a blackened pipe ; a picture postcard or two ; a packet of letters carefully tied with an old cap ribbon ; a small china duck still with its label " To Daddy with love from Alice " in sprawling, childish handwriting.

But everything else, clothes and articles which could be of no possible use to the widow, had been sold by auction—sold, resold, and sold again.

A small proportion of the garments were still new and useful. Some were patched and threadbare, but by far the greater number were frankly disreputable—war at sea does play havoc with the seaman's simple wardrobe.

But the pathetic collection, the greater portion of which would have been scorned by any rag and bone merchant, the contents of one small locker on the mess-deck, sold for no less than £43 2s. 10d.

In some cases the officers, bidding among themselves, had paid considerable sums for articles which were afterwards resold. They took care, however, not to enter into competition with the men for articles which the latter might really want, and the men, realising

this, held aloof when the inhabitants of the wardroom started to bid against each other. By far the greater proportion of the money, however, had come out of the pockets of a small ship's company of ninety odd souls, chief petty officers, petty officers, leading hands, seamen and stokers, men whose average daily earnings were perhaps half a crown! It was before the time that the pay of the lower deck was raised to meet the increased cost of living.

Coglan had been loved by his shipmates. His wife was in needy circumstances, and that was all about it.

If a general subscription had been asked for the result might not have been quite so satisfactory. The bluejacket—quite rightly—detests the idea of being considered a fit subject for charity, hates the thought that his own wife, or the wife of one of his shipmates, should have to be dependent upon the contributions squeezed out of others. The wives, moreover, would be far too proud to accept it.

But if, without mentioning names, they chose to make a collective gift of £20 from their canteen fund, nobody could possibly object. If, when their deceased shipmate's effects were sold, they elected to run up the prices to absurd figures, it was entirely their own affair and nobody could say them nay.

After all, the things were the property of Mrs. Coglan. If she wished them to be sold, well and good. The purchasers were getting their "quid pro quo," and the money realised was Mrs. Coglan's by right. It was the same thing as if she were suddenly discovered to

have been the possessor of a valuable picture which had sold for a fabulous sum at Christy's. Nobody could blame them for putting a sentimental value on Cogan's belongings.

I take off my hat to him who invented this system of helping the widows and fatherless ; I have the deepest admiration for those who carry it on. It is so utterly simple and chivalrous, so generous and unobtrusive ; but that is your modern bluejacket.

2

War, however much we may deplore it for its senseless barbarism and cruelty, brings out much that is lovable in men's characters, and there is nothing which has been more to the front since 1914 than the bond of fellowship between officers and men. People who have served together have endured the same dangers, the same trials and discomforts, are naturally drawn together as a band of brothers, while there is no greater asset to the naval service than the quiet confidence of the men in their officers, and the implicit trust of the officers in their men. And nowhere is this feeling more marked than in the smaller ships, where, through force of circumstances, officers and men have lived in close contact.

The bluejacket—I use the term collectively—is a very lovable person. He is ever so ready to turn to his officer for advice or assistance, ever ready to discuss even his most intimate home affairs if his listener lends a sympathetic ear, while the gratitude for any little kindness is little short of overwhelming. He regards

his officer, in the great majority of cases, as a perfect mine of information and an encyclopædia of knowledge, and there are few of us who at one time or another have not been asked the most abstruse questions in this thirst for information.

"You'll pardon me, sir, but me and Jakes have been having a bit of an argument," is the usual formula, preceded by a cautious knock on one's cabin door and a red face appearing round the curtain.

"Well, what can I do for you?"

"Well, sir. Can you tell me why the sea is blue in the Mediterranean and green colour in the North Sea, 'cos Jakes says its the Gulf Stream what makes the difference; but somehow I don't hold with that?"

I was forced to confess myself beaten.

On another occasion I was asked about the Treaty of Tilsit, and if I would kindly explain why, if a man is allowed by law to marry his deceased wife's sister, he is not also permitted to espouse his deceased brother's widow.

The bluejacket is certainly of an enquiring turn of mind.

Though the popular literature of some of the younger men may be of the "Snippy Bits" persuasion, I have frequently had men come into my cabin to ask if they could borrow a book. Their selection sometimes surprised me and I soon learned that the bluejacket's taste does not lie in the direction of the modern novel, nor in the one and sixpenny "shocker."

Stevenson was always a prime favourite, while Marryat's "Peter Simple" and "Mr.

Midshipman Easy" soon had to be replaced on my bookshelf by new copies. Conan Doyle's "White Company" was also in great demand, while a little book called, I think, "The Siege of Plevna," and written by a British officer serving in the Turkish army, became so popular that I finally discovered it underneath the settee in the charthouse minus its cover, and with its pages so thumbbed that it must have percolated through half the ship's company.

I remember at the beginning of the war when appeals went forth for literature for the Navy, we received large parcels of printed matter. Some of it was good and was very much appreciated, but some folk seemed to have cleared out their upstairs cupboards as if for a jumble sale, for why, I ask you, should we have been inflicted with bound copies of a poultry journal for 1887?

However, it was speedily got rid of—we dropped it in the "ditch*."

A number of other closely printed yellow covered novels bristling with moated granges, lethal weapons, wicked baronets, the midnight burials of victims in convenient shrubberies, a boy hero or two, and many, many "dastards,"—evidently some provincial book-seller's idea of suitable reading matter for the "uneducated sailor"—speedily followed the poultry journal at the hands of their undelighted recipients, as did also a series describing the feats of a boy cow puncher on the plains of Arizona, and the rather lurid adventures of

* The "ditch," "pond," or "drink," that is, the sea.

Mr. Bexton Slake, the famous detective. The men would have none of these things. Contrary to popular belief ashore they are not satisfied with "just anything," neither do they willingly read what is known as "tripe."

I have already given one example of the seaman's generosity, but to carry the subject a little further one can say that the spectacle of a forlorn child will filch the hard-earned coppers from a bluejacket's pocket more readily than will a cocoanut shy. His immense affection for children and animals is proverbial, and though it is true that his love for them often takes the form of spoiling the one and over-feeding the other, he does it out of sheer kindness of heart.

There was a certain child living in a naval port who discovered this for himself, for when the liberty-men passed through the dockyard gates with their little blue bundles on their way ashore on leave, he stationed himself in a convenient position, screwed his knuckles into his eyes, and burst into tears.

"Well then, nipper. What's the matter with you?" a seaman would ask sympathetically, stopping beside him.

"Boo-hooo!" roared the boy.

"Come on, me son. Cheer up! Lost your mother, or what?"

"Boo-hooo! Ain't got no muvver!"

"Where's your father, then?"

"'Ain't go no farver!"

"Orphan. Is that what you are?"

The youth nodded.

"Haven't you got brothers and sisters?"

" 'Ain't got nobody 'cept aunt."

" Why are you crying, then? "

" 'Ain't 'ad nothen t'eat, and aunt beats me 'cos I asks 'er for dinner."

To cut a long story short the sailor took that boy into a convenient eating house, presented him with two enormous meat pasties, and sent him on his way rejoicing with a shilling in his pocket.

And not only one sailor, but many sailors, for that child, aged nine or thereabouts, was a little rogue. He made a profession of bursting into tears when he saw a likely victim, and the capital he accumulated from kind-hearted blue-jackets until he was finally discovered must have been considerable.

As for animals, the seaman dotes on them. Stray dogs seem to attach themselves to him by instinct, and if it were permitted any ordinary ship would at once be converted into a dog's paradise. Apart from the officers' animals, most destroyers seemed to keep a ship's company's dog or two—strange rotund little dogs with tight bodies, black and shiny like a top hat, or peculiar woolly creatures of no settled appearance. If they were ladies they generally went by the name of "Flossie" or "Nellie," while the gentlemen received the somewhat fiercer cognomens of "Nailer," "Growler," or "Bruiser." What they lacked in appearance they more than made up for by their infernal cunning. I guarantee there was not one of them who did not know what time the liberty-men landed, when the hands went to dinner, or what time the meat was served

out to the messes. The butcher did not always own the dog, but the dog generally owned the butcher.

During the war, when shore leave was at a minimum and the men were sometimes cooped up on board for weeks at a time with their ships at short notice for steam, the bluejackets, though they naturally pined for "the beach," rarely seemed to be at a loss for amusement. Some read, some did fretwork or wood carving, and others spent their leisure in doing fancy woolwork on canvas. Their taste in the latter direction was frankly florid, consisting, as a rule, of the flags of all the Allies on a background of emerald green or purple, with suitable embellishments of roses, thistles, shamrocks, crowns, anchors, and other patriotic emblems scattered gracefully around. The sailor, though he would rarely stop to admire the colouring of a sunset, or the glint of sunlight through the arching summit of a breaking sea, is an ardent admirer of colour. One has only to look at his football jerseys and his Christmas cards to discover that.

Singing he delights in, to judge from the sounds which sometimes drifted aft from the forecastle, and the impromptu sing-songs which we were generally asked to attend. A home-made band consisting of a drum, mouth organs, and a concertina, also enlivened many a weary hour until some splay-footed gentleman put his foot through the drum. The inevitable gramophone, too, played an important part in the long winter evenings in harbour, though ours eventually came to grief owing to some

ingenious person taking the instrument to pieces to see if it were possible to play the records backwards. He did not succeed, and the gramophone was never quite the same afterwards.

We had our ship's relief fund, in which the members placed their share of the canteen rent and paid one shilling a month for membership. The idea of saving the money instead of spending it on footballs and musical instruments originated with the men themselves, and the sums collected were to be banked so that grants could be made to the widows or dependants of any members who lost their lives.

Out of our small ship's company of ninety men over seventy-five belonged, and the rules for the administration of the fund were both complicated and voluminous. One regulation, I remember, originally laid down that if a member did not pay his monthly subscription within a week of its becoming due he was to forfeit all benefits of the fund. I pointed out that this erred on the side of severity, particularly in the case of those men with small pay, and after rather a stormy meeting eventually succeeded in establishing a system of fines of threepence a week for instalments overdue. The first offender, I may add, was the Secretary himself.

Our list of officials, though all were strictly honorary, included a President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Hon. Treasurer, Secretary, Hon. Secretary, a Chairman, and five elected Committeemen. I was the President and my

wife the Hon. Treasurer, her duty being to bank the money ashore as it was collected. We held regular meetings, when the balance sheet of the fund was placed on the table, and extraordinary general meetings, usually on the upper deck through want of accommodation elsewhere, whenever any of the five and seventy odd members had any suggestion to offer. The proceedings were carried on with great decorum, the officials of the fund addressing each other as "Mister Honorary Secretary" or "Mister Vice-President," though sometimes, after the official meeting had terminated, riots ensued in which language was a little less parliamentary.

The officers, of course, did not share in the benefits of the fund, but when I left the ship and affairs were wound up I had great difficulty in preventing the committee from presenting my wife with a suitably inscribed memento in recognition of her share in the business, and the Hon. Secretary and the Chairman of the committee from voting themselves suitable honorariums for their "indefatigable efforts on behalf of the fund." We settled the matter by extending a vote of thanks to everybody concerned, including the members, and everyone was satisfied. There is no doubt that our fund was a great success.

Among other characteristics of the sailor is his immense pride in his ship and the flotilla or squadron to which he belongs. He is firmly convinced, like his officers, that there is no vessel like his own, and if anybody dares gainsay him he is sometimes prepared to back

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up his arguments with his fists. One has heard before now of two entire ship's companies indulging in a species of camorra because one fancied they had been insulted by the other. The cause of the original disagreement may have been quite trumpery, a dispute about a foul in a boat race, or the belief that one vessel had cheated at target practice, but none the less it has sometimes resulted in the rival parties meeting ashore and fighting it out then and there to decide which was the better ship.

The bluejacket's "bleat," like the soldier's "growse," means nothing. To grumble at anything is better than not to grumble at all, and it certainly passes the time. But if he has a real grievance it is wise to probe deeper, for as often as not the complaint is well founded. I have known a ship's company simmering with discontent through boats constantly being kept away by officers till the small hours of the morning, or boat's crews being disturbed during their dinner hour for work which might well have been put off till later. To the sailor, as to anyone else, his meal times are sacred. Consideration is what he expects and has a right to, and what should we think if we were perpetually called away in the middle of our luncheon, and returned an hour later to find the table cleared?

But if there is any special work on hand the sailor is quite prepared to sacrifice everything, even his meals. I have been sent away in charge of a target party at six o'clock in the morning with the intention of returning to the ship at half-past seven. But the weather

got bad, the firing was postponed, and we finally regained our vessel at half past one in the afternoon. The men had had nothing except a bowl of cocoa and a biscuit before they started out, but beyond an occasional jocular remark as to the absence of "scran," there were no complaints about their missing breakfasts and dinners. They realised it was nobody's fault. The sailor has no eight hours day. He has to work the clock round if the necessity arises, and it is done without a grumble.

It is in action however, that the man excels. He exhibits an absolute carelessness for his own safety, a complete indifference for everything except his own job. Even if he sees his best friend struck down beside him it does not seem to perturb him at the time. I will not say he does not feel fear, for he is probably the same as you or I ; but he certainly conceals all traces of it.

I remember the awful night in the He'igo-land Bight when we had just seen two of our flotilla blown up on enemy mines. The magazines of both had exploded, shooting up to Heaven in an awful column of smoke and flame. In that moment many of our friends had perished, while the next minute we ourselves might share a similar fate.

"Lord!" said a man on the forecastle. "Strike me, Bill, if this isn't a bloomin' Fifth of November!"

A rather callous remark, perhaps, but I would far prefer to hear a thing of that kind than one more in keeping with the true frightfulness of the event.

At heart the bluejacket is not callous. Suffering appeals to him. The true facts of the case are that he has little imagination, and the absence of it is a quality which has stood him in good stead in many a tight corner.

It was the battle of Jutland, coupled with the aggressive exclusiveness and overbearing manner of the typical Prussian officer, that resulted in the mutiny in the High Sea Fleet in 1917, its subsequent refusal to put to sea in October, 1918, and the ignominious surrender off the Firth of Forth the following month.

In a country where a civilian is liable to be attacked with a sword for the crime of treading upon the sacred toe of an officer in a crowded tramcar, it is not surprising that the general run of officers treated their men as mere automatons, animate things capable of so many units of work. Ruthless severity and punishment on the one hand, the lavish distribution of decorations and the singing of patriotic songs on the other, do not show an understanding of true discipline. Brute force may result in a victorious war against an unprepared enemy, but it can never succeed in a struggle for existence. The men will merely turn against their officers.

Can one imagine a Prussian officer joining in his men's games and having his august person laid flat in the mud of a football field?

I think not ; but this is what happens in the British Navy, and also, let it be said, in the sister service.

Discipline should be based on confidence and personal affection between officers and men,

unity of purpose, and a mutual pride in each other. their ship, squadron, service, and King. In the ideal state punishment should be unnecessary, though sailors, like other men, are only human. Those who give trouble, however, form a minute percentage of the total, and deterrents are necessary for the well-being of the community. A big punishment return, however, is not always due to the men themselves. As often as not the cause lies far deeper.

Our discipline approaches the ideal, in that it is based on the moral factor, the personal relationship between officers and men, rather than upon a repressive system in which the officer is taught to regard himself as an autocrat who can do no wrong. In war, said Napoleon, the moral is to the physical as three is to one, and nowhere has the truth of this saying been more fully proved than during this recent war.

"The men," said officers who took part in the Zeebrugge expedition, "were as keen as mustard and simply splendid."

"Our officers," said a man, "were proper gentlemen and as brave as lions."

What more can one want?

The men who comprise our Navy cannot be bettered. I account it an honour to have served with them in war, for they are very gallant gentlemen, a band of brothers.

CHAPTER XV

THE WATCH DOGS

I. THE LEAVE BOAT

IT was a windy day, and the destroyer, slipping along with the breaking sea broad on her port beam, lurched dizzily from side to side with an occasional wave erupting knee-deep across her low deck. On her port quarter, also rolling heavily, steamed an ordinary two-funnelled cross-Channel passenger vessel painted grey. Another destroyer zig-zagged on her off side.

The steamer, which in ordinary times of peace had carried pleasure seekers and business men to and fro between England and the Continent, had now been pressed into service as a transport. She was filled to over-flowing with officers and men returning to "Blighty" for ten days' respite from the battlefields of France and Flanders. She carried generals with four rows of medal ribbons whose names were on the lips of the public, staff officers with red and blue collar tabs, "brass hats" of every description—and as many lesser fry as she could find room for, some still plastered with the mud of the trenches they had left

a bare twenty hours before when the joyful summons came. She was the leave boat. She carried a valuable cargo. She was crossing a submarine area, hence the escorting destroyers and the lifebelts worn by all her passengers, distinguished and undistinguished.

Some of the soldiers, a very few, were happy, buoyed up at the prospect of seeing wives and children, pleased perhaps with the idea of spending a credit balance at Holt's or Cox's on a few days riotous day's living in London. Some were frankly bored, and sucked pipes which they dared not light. But by far the greater number were undisguisedly miserable—cold about the extremities, pallid about the complexion, strangely tumultuous about the stomach. To tell the truth they were very seasick.

And who shall wonder at it? Even some of the destroyer's men, the youngsters who adopted a deep sea roll ashore and spun such wondrous yarns to anyone of the opposite sex who cared to listen, had already surrendered their breakfasts to the common pool. As for the destroyer's sub, who had lately come from a battleship where he had spent his time bullying the snotties, he felt an utter worm.

He had achieved no breakfast at all, and honestly did not care if it snowed ink. He leant against a corner of the bridge yawning spasmodically with his eyes opening and shutting like an automaton. His face was the colour of his own expensive muffler, pale lemon yellow, and to add to his discomfiture the skipper, who would insist upon smoking

" gaspers," the acrid scent of which was most upsetting, felt boisterously good humoured. He had even smacked the sub on the back, imploring him to " Pull up his socks and look cheerful!" The only answer had been a groan, but not content with this he had added insult to injury by sending a messenger down to the wardroom to enquire as to what there was for lunch.

Lunch! The very thought of a meal caused the sub to totter dizzily to the lee side of the bridge. Was it for this he had joined the Navy? Heaven forbid.

Slightly on the starboard bow the winter sun shone on the white buttress of cliff round about Dover. Ahead, a dip in the rolling yellowish-green uplands, flecked with a splash of blurred colour from the clustered buildings of a town, indicated their destination.

Happy sight. In another half an hour the journey would be over, the agony a thing of the past.

" I wouldn't be a destroyer officer if they doubled my pay," a colonel observed to his neighbour as he sat braced on a seat the lee side of the leave boat's promenade deck. " Heavens! Just look at her rolling!"

The destroyer had lurched on a heavy sea until her mast lay over at an angle of thirty degrees from the vertical, and her curved red bottom with one propeller thrashing the water appeared above the surface.

" I should think not indeed," assented the major beside him, his face pale with misery. " It makes me ill to think of it."

"Lord!" he continued, as the vessel slid over and he put out his hands to prevent himself from being precipitated into the lee waterway. "This ship's a perfect devil for rolling, and the ghastly smell of the engine-room" he concluded the sentence with a yawn.

"It's bad enough for us to have an occasional trip to and fro," the senior officer went on. "Those poor devils have to do it every day of their lives. I don't know Hullo!" he broke off. "What's she up to now?"

The destroyer, circling on her heel, was steaming full pelt in a direction almost at right angles to her original course, and away from the leave boat. Some signal was flying from her yardarm.

"What's she doing?" the major asked languidly. "D'you think"

He was interrupted by a frenzied shout from the bridge above. A syren yelped madly. It was followed by the rattle of the steering gear, then by the sharp clanging of an engine-room telegraph.

The ship seemed to stop short in her stride, and then started to swing rapidly to port under the influence of her helm and one propeller racing madly astern. A sea leapt over the forecastle head and came swishing aft along the promenade deck in a shower of heavy spray.

It was at that moment that the colonel, who had risen to his feet in the certainty that something was wrong, saw a whitened streak speeding towards them through the water

from the direction in which the destroyer was still steaming to leeward. In spite of the breaking seas it was clearly visible, marked on the water as if with a gigantic whitewash brush.

"God!" he ejaculated. "Get up, major! Torpedo!"

The track, lengthening out, came rapidly closer while the two officers, holding on to the rail, watched it, too fascinated to move.

"It'll hit us!" squeaked a nervous subaltern.

"Shut up, you damned young fool!" growled the colonel, his moustache bristling. "D'you want to frighten everyone? Keep your wits about you, dammit!"

The ship was still turning to port. A moment's suspense, and the track, passing close down the starboard side, travelled on past the bows and vanished in the sea beyond.

"Missed, by Heaven!" exclaimed the major, his knees shaking as if with ague.

"And thank God for it," said the colonel quietly.

Then something else drew their attention.

Close astern of the destroyer, which was spinning madly to starboard with the spray flying over her, a rounded hummock of whitened water rose up out of the sea. There came the crashing thudding roar of an underwater explosion, and simultaneously the dome-shaped mass broke into the air in a broad upheaval of spray and greyish smoke. Another, and yet a third.

For a moment or two nothing happened. Then, too far off to be seen really distinctly,

a grey painted structure with two uprights rose from the surface within two hundred yards of the destroyer. It was followed by an elongated bow which lifted dripping from the sea like some awful antediluvian monster. It hung there motionless at an oblique angle to the surface, the water pouring off it in streams.

A flash from the destroyer, followed by the tawny smoke and the roar of the discharge.

"Boomp. . . boom . . . boomp!" came the reports in quick succession, as her 4 inch guns gave tongue as fast as they could be loaded and fired.

The water round the conning tower and bows of the submarine vomited geyser after geyser of spray, through the rifts in which could be seen the reddish glow and puffs of yellow and black smoke of an occasional explosion.

"Bang . . . boomp . . . boom . . . boom!" went the guns. "Poom poom poom . . . poomp!" chimed in a two pounder automatic.

The firing suddenly ceased. The spurting spray fountains subsided. The grey bow and conning tower could no longer be seen.

"Downed him, by jove!" shouted the major, removing his cap and waving it like a boy.

"Thank God for the destroyers!" murmured the colonel devoutly, thinking of his wife and children. "Oh, thank God!"

The leave boat turned her bows homeward and continued her journey. A cheer echoed across the water.

And on the destroyer's bridge the sub no longer suffered from seasickness. He was smiling all over his face. So was the skipper.

2. THE RENDEZVOUS

The weather was hazy with a visibility of little more than five miles. The glass was low and still falling, and the stiff breeze coming in from the west had converted the smooth swell into an ugly, breaking sea which caused the destroyers to plunge heavily as they steamed against it.

The long, regular ridges of the advancing seas did not in the least resemble the confused welter of the North Sea. These big, widely-spaced combers, crowned with their summits of snowy white as they overbalanced, toppled, and fell in ruin, stretched from horizon to horizon. They swept on in regular cadence, irresistible, grim, but very beautiful, so huge that when the ships sank into the wide valleys between them the wind dropped and all sight of the horizon ahead became blotted out by the next rolling hillock of blue-green, foam-streaked water.

Overhead, bunches of frayed-out, whitish-looking cloud chasing each other across a leaden sky showed that the wind would probably increase. It was late autumn in the North Atlantic.

"Convoy is expected to arrive at a rendezvous in latitude $55^{\circ} 45'$ N. longitude $20^{\circ} 30'$ W. at 0900," the sailing orders had said, which, being interpreted, meant that a collection of something over a dozen merchantmen, some carrying Canadian troops, others laden with food and munitions, would arrive at a spot in the Atlantic about three hundred miles off the coast of Ireland at 9 a.m. As

far as this position they would be shepherded by a couple of cruisers to guard them against attack of gunfire from submarines or possible raiders. From the rendezvous, which was near the limit of the dangerous submarine zone, they would be taken home by the anti-submarine escort of destroyers

The time was nine o'clock. The escort, according to their reckoning, were already at the rendezvous ; but there were no signs of the convoy, nothing but a circle of five miles of sea bounded on all sides by the grey, impenetrable mist. The four destroyers, spreading out to cover as wide a front as possible, started to steam to and fro—five miles west, five miles east, backwards and forwards.

Half an hour passed—an hour—an hour and a half.

The Commander, the senior officer, who had been raising his glasses every few minutes to scan the bare horizon to the west, dropped them for the fiftieth time with a grunt of disgust. He was beginning to feel impatient. The expression of his usually placid red countenance with its blue unshaven chin was one of worry.

For one thing he had had no breakfast. He felt dirty, and his cheeks and eyelids were furrowed with little white runnels of dried salt, streaked here and there with black from the noisome back-draught from the funnels. He was very tired, for sleep during the night had been quite out of the question with the ship crashing and pounding against a head sea. And now, to cap it all, the expected convoy

had not appeared. He was used to the strenuous life, but sometimes it became rather ageing.

"I can't make it out," he said to himself, waddling ponderously across the reeling bridge to the chart table. He could not walk naturally.

"I hope we really are on the blessed rendezvous," he added to the sub-lieutenant beside him. "We haven't had any sights to check our position."

"If anything I put her a shade beyond it, sir," the junior officer answered. "We were doing a good seventeen knots until the sea got up at four o'clock, and I've been logging thirteen ever since we eased to fifteen."

"Steering alright?" queried the C.O. "I notice we've been yawing* a lot."

"Not so bad, sir. Our position tallies with the others. I asked 'em all at seven."

The Commander smothered a yawn.

"And what about your deviation†?" he asked.

"I checked it yesterday, sir."

"Seems alright to me, too," the skipper said at last, fiddling with a pair of dividers in his gloved hand. "I suppose the convoy's late, and that's all about it. I wish to Heaven they'd let us know by wireless when they don't intend to fetch up in time, the blighters!"

He left the chart table, blew down a speaking tube beside the compass, and applied his ear.

* Yawing is failure to steer a steady course, either due to bad steering or a heavy sea.

† The ever-changing error produced in the compass by the magnetism of the ship.

"Wireless office," came a thin ready voice from the other end.

"Cap'ten speaking," said the commander. "Heard anything of our convoy?"

"No, sir. Nothing."

"Call 'em up by buzzer,* then, and make following signal. You've got the call sign of the cruiser escort, havn't you?—Yes.—Very well, make this.—'Destroyers now at rendezvous. What time do you expect to arrive?'—No, rendezvous, you fathead! R.E.N.-D.E.Z.V.O.U.S.—Don't you know your French?—Yes.—That's it. Get it through as fast as you can."

The commander replaced the speaking tube, glanced instinctively at the compass, and then turned about.

"It beats me how these wireless fellows pick up what they do," he observed to the sub. "There's Harper on watch now, and three months ago when he came to us he was a miserable little pipsqueak who was seasick every time he went to sea. Never been to sea before, in fact. And now he sits hermetically sealed in that cubby-hole of his blowing gaspers† in a gale of wind as if he hadn't any stomach at all. Getting good at his job, too. Quite a cute lad. I wonder"

But the sub was not listening. He was gazing intently at the destroyer four miles away on the starboard beam.

"I thought so," he muttered, as a brilliant white light began to flicker in and out from her bridge. "She's flashing, signalman!"

* Short distance wireless.

† i.e., smoking cigarettes.

"I've got me eye on her, sir," the yeoman of signals answered, unceremoniously hustling his seasick subordinate.

"Get a move on, you blinkin' Hottentot!" he hissed in a very audible whisper. "Nip up on to the searchlight platform, and stand by to answer when I tell you!"

The ordinary signalman, climbing on to the narrow circular platform, above the bridge with his oilskin flapping in the breeze, switched on the searchlight and waited.

"Answer!" howled the yeoman, standing with his legs wide apart and his telescope steadied against a stanchion.

The searchlight shutter clicked obediently.

"Convoy—now—in—" the yeoman started.

"Damn!" in an ill-suppressed whisper, as the violent movement of both ships made it difficult to read the distant flashes. "Why the hell can't she keep her light trained! Give her I.M.I.,* Pyke! I.M.I.!"

The shutter burst into frenzied rattling as the letters were spelt out.

"Ah, that's a bit more like it," the yeoman went on, as the flickers from four miles away became more brilliant and readable. "Convoy—now—in—sight—west—north—west," he read slowly, each word punctuated by an answering flash and the click of the searchlight shutter from his own ship. "Distant—four—and—a—half—miles."

"Thank Heaven for that!" exclaimed the commander, very relieved. "Bring her round to north, sub, and go on to seventeen. Mes-

* i.e., the Morse sign for "repeat."

senger, whistle down the tube and tell the wireless office to cancel that last signal if it hasn't already been made."

The helm went over, and the destroyer, wallowing like a hull hippopotamus in the heavy sea, now broad on the port beam, sped off to the northward with the recall signal to her division flapping from the masthead.

A few minutes later the dull outlines of ships began to loom one by one through the mist to the north-westward. Within a quarter of an hour the entire convoy was in sight.

The merchantmen were steaming at equal distances in two columns, three vessels in one line and four in the other, while a grey-painted, four funnelled cruiser, plunging heavily in the following sea with her smoke trailing out ahead of her, zig-zagged ceaselessly in front. Another cruiser, acting the part of whipper-in, followed astern.

The merchant vessels, all of which were large Transatlantic vessels, steamed stolidly ahead with scarcely any perceptible movement. The three in the nearest column, passenger liners, were crowded with men—promenade decks, forecastles, and poops packed with khaki-clad humanity, men even swarming in the rigging like the fruit on an apple tree. They were Canadian reinforcements destined for the western front after a spell of further training in England. They were experiencing their first taste of war, and the advent of the destroyers and their own entry into the German barred submarine zone was too memorable an event to be missed after a monotonous and somewhat

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disconcerting passage across the Atlantic from Halifax.

The other four merchantmen, all deeply laden, were large cargo freighters. They evidently carried foodstuffs and munitions of war.

They were all painted in a gaudy camouflage—stripes, oblongs, patches, whorls, and curves of many colours, black, white, grey, brown, green, and yellow, even salmon pink. With the background of grey sea mist behind them they looked like outlandish cardboard toys, as if some impressionist had run amok with his paint box.

But there was a method in the madness. The colour was designed to break up the natural shapes and shadows of the ship's hulls, not exactly to conceal them—for no ship can be rendered invisible against a background of sky—but to cause apparent distortion, to mislead a submarine commander gazing through his periscope as to the exact direction in which the ships were steaming. In this it was certainly successful, however grotesque the effect.

The senior destroyer, closing the cruiser at the head of the procession, held a short conversation by semaphore.

"Keep a careful eye on the last ship of the port column," the cruiser said. "She drops astern at the beginning of every watch. Says she is burning bad coal, but I've been making rude signals all the way across. The rest of the bunch are pretty good, and you will find them able to do a steady twelve knots as a whole. They want bullying about lights after dark."

"Thank you," said the destroyer. "Wish you a pleasant passage journey back."

"Thanks, but sea is getting up, I'm afraid," answered the cruiser. "Good-bye, and good luck to you."

The big ship's helm went over as she turned through sixteen points to the westward on her return journey. A giant sea, the first of many, crashed over her fore-castle and erupted against her fore turret in a smother of spray which swept high over her bridge, and within ten minutes, having collected her consort from the rear of the convoy, she was drawing out of sight astern, steaming as fast as the sea would permit back to Halifax.

"Those fellows don't get much rest," said the commander as he watched them disappear. "Regular dog's life. They get back the other side, coal, and then start off with another convoy the moment they've finished. And so on, ad infinitum."

"And what about us, sir?" laughed the sub, wringing out his sodden muffler and glancing astern at the spray-whitened funnels.

"Us?" grunted the skipper. "Lord bless me! What d'you think the government pay us one and six hard lyers* for? Twenty seven extra bloomin' pounds per annum. Just think of the opulence of it!"

"But still, sir," the junior officer persisted. "We do have a pretty hectic time. Last month we did twenty-seven days at sea out of thirty-one, and steamed between five and six

* i.e., "hard-lying money," the extra allowance paid for service in destroyers. Recently abolished.

thousand miles. This month, with any luck, we'll beat that to a frazzle."

"Hectic?" the commander replied. "Well, I suppose it is, but shan't we all be bored when peace comes along and we aren't allowed out of harbour. Heigho!" he added with a yawn. "What I want now is something to eat. I wonder if that devil of a steward of ours is sufficiently recovered to cook something?"

"I doubt it," said the sub.

And the convoy, escorted by its destroyers, who rolled, lurched, and wallowed in the following sea, steamed stolidly on towards England. Not a flutter of a periscope disturbed their progress.

* * * *

"The passage," as the commander said in his report on arriving at the base, "was quite uneventful. I regret to report the following minor damage to deck fittings caused by heavy weather, none of which impairs the seaworthiness of the ship."

"Your damage will be made good when opportunity occurs," came the reply from the Captain (D) of the flotilla to which the destroyer belonged. "Complete with fuel with all despatch. You will be required to sail with an outward bound convoy sailing at six p.m. Acknowledge."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE "MOB."

Light craft which go through the enemy mine-fields and mine inside them.

SIR ERIC GEDDES.

July 11th, 1918.

I

EVERYWHERE the horizon was invisible in the increasing gloom, and save to the east, where the last traces of sunset still lingered as a faint orange smear in the lower sky, the Heavens were slowly becoming overcast with piled-up masses of deep, inky-looking cloud. They were sure harbingers of rain.

It was bitterly cold, for the wind, which had died away at sundown, now came out of the east-north-east with gradually increasing force, the chilliness accentuated by the speed of the ship as she steamed towards it at twenty knots. The hitherto calm water became furred and ruffled with tiny breaking seas, and within twenty minutes, by which time all signs of the sun had disappeared and the ocean was wrapped in the blue-black mystery of the North Sea

night, the lop had risen until thin whiffs of icy spray were sweeping intermittently across the high forecastles of the destroyers as they drove their way eastward in single line.

There were six of us, six and a flotilla leader, and this was not our first expedition across the water, nor yet the thirty-first. The "mob," as our senior officer called us, knew this stretch of water as perhaps no other British flotilla will ever know it. Ours was a particular function, work which took us across the North Sea sometimes twice a week, sometimes oftener. But what we did was spoken of in whispers, where we went remained a mystery except to the initiated few.

Presently a dim light, winking redly out of the darkness, glimmered spasmodically over the horizon, broad on the port bow. The officer of the watch on the bridge of the second ship in the line, timing the interval of the flashes by counting, noted the time by his wrist watch, and then bent down to run his eye along the compass.

"South Dogger, sir," he said to the muffled figure of his commanding officer standing close beside him. "We're right on time. She'll be abeam in about twenty minutes."

The commander, grunting by way of reply, slid the strap of the binoculars round his neck and put the glasses to his eyes.

"Not showing up well to-night," he observed. "How far d'you put her off?"

"About five miles, sir," said the sub.

"And we've another hundred odd miles to go before we get to the position, what?"

"Yes, sir. A hundred from the time she's abeam."

"Gun's crews closed up?"

"Yes, sir."

The North and South Dogger Bank light-ships were more than mere nodding acquaintances. They had come to be looked upon as old friends.

2

Each time the flotilla entered the Heligoland Bight, that wet triangle bounded to the westward by the line joining the Horns Reef to the Dutch island of Terschelling, an area which had virtually been closed to big ships since the earlier days of the war, we left something tangible behind us, something which gave the Bosche furiously to think and caused him some annoyance. For when the "mob" went forth, sometimes nine strong, sometimes eight, seven, or six, we picked our way through the tortuous passages left between many lines drawn seemingly at random upon a chart. But the lines were not altogether promiscuous. They represented British minefields carefully laid in exact positions, though mines, whatever their nationality, are no respecters of persons, as everybody knows. But they remain at a constant level from the sea bottom, so the flotilla, treading like Agag, generally selected high water for its more hazardous nocturnal activities.

There were Bosche minefields too, the precise localities of which were unknown. It is suspected that they were laid for the express purpose of putting a stop to the "mob's"

expeditions, and the "mob" knew they were there, for sometimes we saw unfamiliar-looking mines on the surface which were obviously not British. On one occasion, moreover, a great yellow-painted monster bristling with horns, its mooring wire sheared through by a rapidly revolving propeller, flopped clumsily to the surface, and lay wallowing in the wake of one of us. It was a near thing, but how many narrow squeaks we had in those days nobody will ever know. "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof." We had to take our chance, and nobody really worried.

There were other things to be considered besides mines, and these were the patrols of German destroyers, which were reputed to be at sea in the Bight during the night. The "mob" who longed with all their simple souls for the chance of a scrap, would dearly have loved to meet them, but never did, though on one occasion they did pass a large bunch of Bosche minesweepers escorted by destroyers jogging merrily back to Germany.

The Huns, talking to each other with their flashing lamps, were steaming along, oblivious to all danger, while the flotilla, with their guns trained on them, passed so close that they could even smell the foul coal reek from the German funnels. The "mob" could have made cat's meat of that little party had they been permitted, but they had strict orders not to fight on their way in, unless actually attacked. Theirs were more important work than mere chicken butchery.

The two groups, British and German, were

steaming in roughly the same direction, and had the night been fine and clear, instead of gusty and wet—had the enemy been keeping a good look-out, instead of sheltering behind their bridge-dodgers to keep the spray out of their eyes, one of them might perhaps have sighted that line of dark shapes which slid past them at a range of no more than six hundred yards. Then, perhaps, a German gun might have blazed out and have given the "mob" the chance it wished for. But no such thing happened. The Huns were all asleep, and the British flotilla, damning them in no measured terms, trained its guns fore and aft, and passed on into the darkness ahead.

Every time the flotilla returned to its east coast base after one of these expeditions, certain responsible people at the Admiralty expressed their relief, and added another red line to an already over-crowded chart kept in a locked drawer. In course of time that chart became covered with a veritable network of red lines, so thin and so closely spaced that it seemed impossible for any ship to pass through in safety. But the danger had to be accepted, and the "mob," thanking its lucky stars for a good navigator and praying for continued good joss, carried on.

Sometimes, after a particularly hair-raising "stunt," there came a congratulatory telegram from the Admiralty, which, acting like a tonic, caused officers and men alike to work with renewed energy and with smiles all over their faces. It certainly was a little pleasing to be told that our work was appreciated, and, after

all, there was no other flotilla in the world quite like ours, no flotilla leader quite so loved by those who had the honour to serve under his orders.

For the "mob," let it be understood, were rather proud of themselves and of what they did. There was considerable competition among destroyer officers to become members of the fraternity, for they were ovipositors. They laid eggs of a mottled greenish-brown tinge with peculiar protuberant horns which hatched them out when their time came. They were unpleasant eggs, and, like those of the wily cuckoo, they were laid in other bird's nests.

So the work was not without its excitements, in addition to which, it was sometimes no easy matter to lay an accurate minefield in a North Sea fog so thick that the bows of the ship were all but invisible from the bridge. Moreover, the "mob" had to work by time in all its operations, as flashing signals in enemy waters were naturally to be deprecated as letting into the secret anybody who happened to be looking. The use of wireless was also strictly taboo, for the Hun, with his directional receiving apparatus ashore, could fix the position of any chatterer with absolute precision. Small fry who visited the Heligoland Bight had long since come to realise that their safety depended upon strict silence.

Some hours before arriving at its destination, therefore, a zero time, indicated by a long flash on a carefully shaded light, had to be made by the leader, and duplicate stop-watches were

started in every ship. The speed was reduced to the laying speed at certain intervals afterwards, and about five minutes later the leading vessel would swing round to the course on which the first lines of mines were to be laid. The rear ship in the line would start depositing her cargo the moment she steadied on this course, and from this time on, the whole operation would proceed more or less automatically, every succeeding unit starting to lay her mines the moment her next astern finished and swung out of the line.

The line of mines was therefore more or less continuous, though in the course of the manœuvre the flotilla, to avoid treading on each other's toes, had to separate temporarily. At the end of the operation they were supposed, theoretically, by steering certain courses at certain speeds, to finish up in a single line some distance to one side of the newly laid minefield. Sometimes, on the clearer nights, they managed to do so without difficulty. On the other hand, the evolution was worked out to fractions of a minute, and if a ship's helm went over a few seconds late, or if a mine took it into its mulish head to jamb stubbornly on the rails, and so to delay the depositing of the whole cargo, the error in time became cumulative, and every other ship in the flotilla felt it.

On the dark nights, too, when the hull of another vessel could not be seen at more than a couple of hundred yards, the manœuvre became positively exciting, and the "mob" occasionally found themselves in an unholy

tangle, with the ships in anything but a straight line and some bright spirit doing his best to break through at right angles.

So in the palmy days of learning they had many hair-raising adventures. There was every excuse for bumps, crashes, and the subsequent Courts of Enquiry, and sometimes they occurred.

Once, during a thick fog well over the other side of the North Sea, it became necessary to alter course unexpectedly, and number seven in the line lost her next ahead in the murk. The night was very dark and the visibility perhaps sixty yards, and suddenly those on the bridge of number two, jogging along at ten knots close astern of the leader, saw a destroyer on their starboard bow steaming at right angles towards the gap. The two craft sighted each other simultaneously, and jamming their telegraphs over to full speed astern, yelped on their syrens and worked their helms in a frantic effort to wriggle free. But sixty yards is sixty yards, and one cannot pull up a thousand tons dead-weight like a taxi-cab. Collision was inevitable from the moment they sighted.

Closer and closer they came, while the skipper of number two, gripping his bridge rail and with his heart in his mouth, saw the low, dark shape of number seven gliding athwart his bows. He even found himself gazing into the eyes of a white-faced little group of men standing on her upper deck.

"Where the 'ell are you comin' to?" howled a voice.

They might well ask.

Then a sickening bump, the grinding crash of steel against steel, as the sharp stem struck number seven fair in the foremost boiler room and bit a V-shaped gash in the thin plating, through which the sea poured in like a mill race.

It was an awful moment. A collision off the British coast with a dockyard close by is one thing, but a similar occurrence with a sinking or badly damaged ship thirty miles off the enemy's coast and full two hundred and fifty from home is something more than a joke.

And number seven was badly damaged, daylight would arrive in an hour or two, while the "mob" were in the very thick of probable Hun patrols. Through their receivers the operators could hear German wireless very close, a Zeppelin somewhere overhead chatting to a friend in Germany, and some ship within five miles chiming in the conversation. Had their presence been discovered? It was quite possible. They prayed all they knew that the fog would hold.

The weather, luckily, was calm but the damaged ship lay helpless and unable to steam, and while one of her mates started to take her in tow, the lame duck plastered herself with collision mats and started her pumps to keep down the flow of water. The towing ship having made fast her end of the wire, went head to tug number seven's bows round in the desired direction. But the injured destroyer lay deep in the water like a log, and, unable to steer, yawed wildly from side to side. The 3½-inch steel towing wire parted like a piece of pack-thread.

Again she was taken in tow by another ship, and this time, as she had got her steering gear to work, it was successful. By the time it was accomplished, however, it was broad daylight—but the fog still held.

It was a mournful little company which started off across the North Sea at a wearisome eight knots. There were no other British ships near to help them, and even if there had been, the use of wireless would have been suicidal. The "mob" had to accomplish its own salvation. The spare destroyers were stationed on either flank, to ward off possible submarines, while at the tail of the procession came two more craft, one to dash alongside number seven and to rescue her officers and ship's company, and another, with her torpedoes ready, standing by to administer the "coup de grace," lest the fog should lift and they should suddenly find themselves in the presence of a superior force of the enemy. Nobody felt really cheerful. Most people were downright unhappy, for no one relishes the prospect of a fight with a "dud" in tow, in addition to which, it is always unpleasant to have to sink one of one's own craft when there is the least possibility of getting her home.

Luckily, however, extreme measures did not have to be taken. The weather throughout the day alternated between fog and thick mist, and though at times the telegraphists reported hearing the wireless of the Zeppelins very close, the Hun in his gasbag little knew what was happening under his very nose. And the night, when it came, was dark, with

no moon, and the "mob," blessing their good joss, realised they were as safe as they ever were.

For thirty-six mortal hours they shepherded their damaged sister two hundred and fifty odd miles home across the North Sea, took her up a river, and tucked her in a British dry-dock, safe but not quite sound.

3

The little cherub who sits up aloft and watches the destinies of those who go down to the sea in His Majesty's ships, evidently had a warm corner in his heart for minelayers. It was he who caused that merciful fog which helped them to get back scot-free, a fog which, at any other time, we should have reviled most bitterly.

But the little cherub must have a watch below sometimes; and every flotilla has its ups and downs, and once, only once the "mob's" luck deserted them.

It happened on a clear, dark night well to the eastward of the meridian of 5° east. The flotilla, steaming in single line, were on their way to lay one of their usual minefields, when, at fifteen minutes to midnight, about half an hour before they reached their destination, there came the thudding roar of a heavy explosion from somewhere down the line and a brilliant ruby flash which illuminated sky and sea.

Looking astern from the leading vessels, one could see a gigantic pillar of orange-red flame, mingled with smoke, water, and

débris, shooting up out of the calm sea to a height of three or four hundred feet. It was an unnerving sight, for in that moment we knew that the thing they had regarded as possible for so long had actually come to pass. There was no British minefield in the vicinity. We were in among German mines, and the fifth ship in the line had struck one, which, on exploding had detonated a magazine.

For a moment there was a dead silence, followed by a splashing in the water, as fragments came raining down from the skies; then the roaring bellow of escaping steam, followed by the sound of men's voices, and shouts of "Out all boats! Prepare to tow aft!"

The leader and his next astern, signalling to the remainder of the flotilla to stop engines, circled round and went to the assistance of their stricken friend. She was still afloat, her bow portion deep in the water and her stern in the air. But the bows, from the foremost boiler-room forward, had completely disappeared, and in their stead was a ragged tangle of twisted steel plating, through which the oil fuel, ignited by the explosion, blazed in a sickly yellow glare and clouds of oily black smoke. It was a clear night, and the flaming beacon must inevitably have attracted to the scene any and every craft within twenty miles had any been there.

Placing his ship ahead of the wreck, the leader made preparations for taking her in tow stern first, while the others, lowering their boats, hovered round, searching for possible survivors

in the water. They rescued some who could be heard crying piteously for help, and many of whom, blown through the air by the explosion, owed their lives to a miracle. One man with a broken thigh managed to swim a hundred yards before he finally collapsed in a rescuing boat, but the commanding officer himself had the most wonderful escape of all. He was standing on the bridge when the explosion came, and, stunned by the shock, was hurled through space. When he recovered his senses he found himself in the water a full four hundred yards from the blazing wreck of his ship, where, though in great pain, he at once set about inflating his life-saving waistcoat. Though he had sustained severe injuries there were no bones broken, and, not content with saving his own life, he actually succeeded in rescuing a drowning shipmate.*

Some valuable lives were saved, but in that brief instant many men had gone to a violent death.

The god of war had not played his last trick, for at seven minutes past midnight, while the leader was busied about her preparations for towing, there came another booming roar and an awful flash, as another destroyer struck a mine a quarter of a mile away from the first. A ship at once hurried to help her, and rescued many survivors, but again a magazine had exploded, and a gallant little company of British officers and men had served their last commission. And about a quarter of an

* His gallantry was subsequently recognised by the bestowal of the Royal Humane Society's medal.

hour later, this second destroyer, which had been floating with her stern very low in the water, reared her bows skywards like a spear-head, and sank to the depths below.

About three minutes after this explosion, moreover, another destroyer who was moving ahead dead slow with her helm hard over, felt a mine touch under the starboard bow and go rumbling aft along the bottom. Her commanding officer, with a prayer in his heart, held his breath and waited for the explosion. He was a bit of a fatalist in his way, and, realising that luck was out, was past caring very much what happened, if only it would happen quickly. But the dreaded explosion never came. The mine, by some lucky fortune, slid aft and floated free without exploding. But for that, this particular account of the incident might never have been written.

The grey dawn was already breaking in the east when the wreck of the first destroyer, still blazing furiously, and with an occasional shell or cartridge exploding, was finally in tow and course was shaped for home. But even so, the position was still one of horrible uncertainty. For all the "mob" knew they were still in the midst of a German minefield, and at any moment another ship might be blown up. Which direction they steered mattered little. North, south, east, or west—all might be equally dangerous. There was nothing to be done but to select the most convenient course and to go ahead, trusting to Providence. They did so, and Providence was kind.

But they were not out of the wood yet,

for an hour later a bulkhead in the damaged vessel collapsed, her bow portion dipped deeper in the water, and the stern reared itself in the air until rudder and propeller were out of water. Further towing was impossible, and orders were reluctantly given for the wreck to be sunk.

So British guns and depth-charges sent a British ship to her grave, and the "mob," sadly and with mournful hearts, turned their bows to the westward and steamed away.

The flotilla had left their base nine strong and returned seven, and as, on the homeward journey, they steamed past the familiar landmarks of their own estuary, the eyes of some were moistened at the thought of those who would never see England again. Nearly a hundred of their flotilla-mates, men whom they loved and treasured as friends, had gone to their deaths in the cold, grey North Sea.

But they carried on. The Navy never sleeps, never lies down under a blow, and its work must continue. It conceals what lies innermost in its heart, and both in peace and in war the price of Admiralty must be paid. It is inevitable.

So the "mob" carried on, and less than a week later, were laying mines within seven miles of Zeebrugge.

4

"How much longer, sub?" asked the commander, standing close up to the bridge screens with his eyes on the dark bulk of the next ahead.

"Exactly eleven minutes, sir."

"Eleven minutes! D'you mean to tell me it wasn't more than six minutes ago that I asked you? Are you certain that stop-watch of yours hasn't chucked its hand in again?"

"Quite certain, sir," said the sub lieutenant, quite unmoved "I'm checking it by my wrist watch."

The skipper, who was beginning to get impatient, grunted something unintelligible and looked ahead again, only to notice that the ship was yawing ever so little out of the line.

"Steady, Ryan!" he said to the coxswain at the wheel. "Steady on the course I gave you!"

"Steady it is, sir," answered the petty officer, turning on the messenger beside him with a face of wrath.

"Awkins!" in a strident whisper. "If you don't give over leanin' against my wheel and gets me slated again, I'll ruddy well skin you alive when I gets you below! Stand up straight, can't you, 'stead of lollin' about half asleep like a bloomin' nobleman!"

The youth Hawkins, an Ordinary Seaman R.N.V.R., who a year before had still been his teacher's *bete noir* in a village school, mumbled an apology and moved hastily aside. He had had no sleep that night, and it was now nearly four o'clock in the morning. At eight, possibly, he might be permitted to go below to seek what repose he could on a crowded and noisy mess-deck. He had long since come to the conclusion that being a sailor was all very well provided one remained ashore—the uniform provided such an attraction to the other sex.

But gadding about the North Sea in a destroyer, where he was alternately seasick and wet to the skin, was chaffed unmercifully by his ship-mates, and could never turn into his hammock at all, was quite another matter. He rather fancied himself swaggering about his native village in all the glory of his blue serge uniform, but aboard the ship he was the lowliest of the lowly, while at sea he frequently wished he had joined the Army.

The sky was already starting to lighten with the coming of the dawn, and a few minutes later the commander, who had been gazing intently on the port bow, suddenly clapped his glasses to his eyes.

"Meat, Number One! Meat!" he exclaimed joyfully to the first lieutenant. "Small craft of some sort fine on the port bow! Bearing—red, two oh!"

The first lieutenant, after a hasty glance through his binoculars, leant down and put his lips to a voice-pipe.

"All guns!" he shouted. "Bearing—red, two oh! Range—one, two, double oh!—Shall I load, sir?" he went on to query, knowing full well that they were well inside the Bight and that anything they sighted must be hostile.

The commander nodded.

"All guns—load with lyddite!—Range—one thousand."

There came the hollow thump of the projectile as the loading number at the forecastle gun drove it home, the clang of the cartridge as it followed, and the metallic smack of the breech-block as it slammed to.

" Ready ! " the loading number bellowed.

The commander felt his heart throbbing with excitement, for at any moment the vessel they were approaching so rapidly might open fire. The leader too, though she made no sign of altering course, must also have sighted the stranger, so at any instant the game might start.

But suddenly the commander realised that the craft they were nearing looked absurdly small, and putting his glasses up for another look, dropped them almost instantly with an exclamation of disgust.

" Dammit ! " he ejaculated angrily. " I could have sworn she was a T.B. or a destroyer, but it's nothing more or less than some of their rotten old outpost trawlers ! We never have any luck in this blooming flotilla ! "

It was not quite true, but the first lieutenant also was bitterly disappointed, though, hoping that the hostile craft would precipitate matters by opening fire, he kept his guns trained upon them.

But nothing happened. The " mob " were almost on the spot for laying their mines, and evidently the leader had made up his mind to finish that job, and then to return and deal with the outpost craft.

So the flotilla steamed on, crossing the bows of three anchored Germans at little more than three hundred yards in the grey half-light of the dawn. And the enemy beyond making some signal with a flashing lamp, evinced no emotion at all. No men could be seen on their decks, and though the ships were all

armed with guns, the weapons still remained shrouded in their canvas covers.

The British and German ensigns are very similar, and in the vague twilight the solitary look-out may have mistaken the flotilla for a friendly one, though it is difficult to see how any seaman worthy of the name could fail to tell the difference in build between British and German destroyers. Probably it was imagined that no British flotilla would ever venture so close to the enemy's coast, or, possibly, it may have been considered judicious not to court certain destruction by opening fire. But whatever the reason, the Huns maintained a masterly inactivity which was not in accordance with British tradition.

"Thirty seconds more, sir," murmured the sub, a little later, when the trawlers had been left about a mile astern.

"Twenty seconds ten seconds
. five seconds Time, sir!"

The commander, with one eye on the next ahead, flung an order over his shoulder to the man at the revolution telegraph.

"One, four, five, sir," the bluejacket repeated, twirling a handle until a pointer moving round a dial touched the desired figure.

The engine-room reply gong clanged noisily, and as the turbines were throttled down to fifteen knots the deep roaring of the stokehold fans died away to a gentle murmur.

"One, three, nine!" came another order, as the ship seemed to creep ever so little closer to her leader. "Steady Ryan! Watch your steering!"

"Leader's altering course to starboard, sir!" came the sing-song report of the yeoman of signals.

The commander watched the whitened water at the spot where the senior officer's ship had put her helm over, and just before it reached the bows, gave an order. The ship travelled round dead in the wake of the leader, and one by one, as they reached the turning point, the remainder of the flotilla followed.

And one by one, starting from the tail of the line, the destroyers laid their mines and could be seen turning out of the line.

"How much longer, sub?" the skipper asked, tapping his foot impatiently.

"We should start in ten seconds, sir."

"Next astern hauling out, sir," as the destroyer behind, with her helm hard over, shot round on her heel.

"Stand by," said the commander, watching her as she swung out of the line. "Lay mines!"

A midshipman R.N.V.R., crouching on the bridge in front of a box arrangement fitted with coloured electric lights, flicked over a switch. Instantly the words "Lay mines" shone out in red from a similar contrivance aft in the stern, where the officer in charge of the actual operation of laying, turned another switch, and caused the words "Am laying" to appear in green on the bridge tell-tale, to show that the order was understood.

The motors wheezed and groaned as the hauling-aft wires tautened out and took the strain. The long lines of mines on their

sinkers each side of the quarterdeck came rumbling slowly aft on their rollers, while men, bringing their shoulders to bear, assisted them along the rails. A mine on its sinker weighs the best part of half a ton, and sometimes, if the rollers were at all sticky, or if the motor gave out, it took the greater portion of the ship's company to coax them overboard into their rightful element.

The surgeon probationer, eyeing his stop-watch, nodded to a man standing at a lever. The lever shot up, and the first mine, toppling drunkenly down its chute, fell overboard with a hollow thud and a splash.

From this time on, the laying became almost automatic, the mines being dropped at regular intervals.

"One gone, sir—two—three—," came up the bridge voice pipe.

"Eighteen—nineteen—twenty—."

"Stop laying! Hard a'port! Steer north seventy west!" came the commander's order.

The juggling with the coloured lights was repeated. The ship slithered round, and, as she steadied on the new course, the laying recommenced.

"Twenty - one — twenty - two — twenty - three—" "Thirty - eight—thirty - nine—forty. All mines gone, sir!"

The commander, who was always glad to see the last of his cargo, sighed with relief, and gave another order to the helm, and ten minutes later, by which time the flotilla were in single line, and the leader, having laid her consignment, had once more taken station

ahead, they turned their tails on the dangerous area and steamed back towards the hostile outpost craft with their guns ready for action.

It was a bloodless victory, for not a gun was fired, even though it was now broad daylight, and the Germans must have been fully aware of the nationality of their visitors.

Two destroyers were told off to look after each trawler, and presently the centre vessel of the three, whose crew had already deserted her in their boat, blew up a heavy report and foundered shortly afterwards. She had been destroyed by her own people with a time bomb.

At first it was hoped that the other two would be taken home as prizes, for, hailed through megaphones and spurred on by destroyers, they hastily slipped their cables, and turned their bows towards England. But fate ruled otherwise. The trawlers were slow, ungainly craft, while the flotilla was still within easy reach of the hostile coast, and German wireless, which had been answered from shore stations, had been heard quite close at hand. There was no knowing, therefore, that at any moment a hostile light cruiser squadron or destroyer flotilla might not appear on the scene and make things decidedly unpleasant, more particularly as the wind had chopped round to south-west, the glass was going down, and the sea was quickly rising.

So reluctantly, very reluctantly, orders were given for the German crews to be taken off, and their craft to be scuttled with explosive charges. The Huns, with much impedimenta,

were ferried across. Their ships were sent to the bottom, and the "mob," rather disappointed at being done out of a fight, steamed off to the westward in the teeth of the rapidly rising gale.

They had a bad "dusting" before they finally arrived at their base, while they were not altogether happy in their minds by information, elicited from some of their prisoners, to the effect that five light cruisers and twenty-two destroyers were searching for them. It was no pleasant prospect to be chased home in a blinding gale by a superior force of angry Huns so the "mob" hurried—but the Huns never materialised.

And some of the "mob" were very seasick, but even Ordinary Seaman Hawkins was not quite so seasick as a certain German flight-sub-lieutenant clad in field grey and elastic sided boots. He, poor wight, had fought ashore in Russia and Roumania, and, having volunteered as a seaplane pilot, had been sent to an outpost boat to pick up wrinkles in navigation and chart-work. He had not learnt much, however, for he had spent the first eight-and-forty hours seasick in his bunk, while the fiftieth hour of his training saw him on his way to England in a British destroyer. By the fifty-first hour he was in a state of utter collapse.

Decidedly it was a good morning's work, and the "mob" rejoiced exceedingly.

CHAPTER XVII

“SIC TRANSIT”

WHEN, on the grey morning of November 21st, the “mob” carried out their last operation of the war, they were not alone. It was one of those typical North Sea days with the horizon shrouded in mist which reduced visibility to a few thousand yards, but the sea seemed covered with ships.

Squadrons of battleships, looming huge and indistinct against the nebulous background, steamed into sight in their orderly formations, to disappear a few minutes later like dissolving pictures on a screen. A column of battle cruisers, their enormous hulls and bulky funnels dwarfing even those of the battleships, swept by. Squadrons of light cruisers, and the cavalry of the sea, slim and graceful with their slight hulls and gently raking masks and funnels, slid seaward in perfect order, while seaplane carriers, uncouth, pre-historic-looking monsters, gaudy in their nightmare camouflage of grey, black, white, blue, and green, looking like animated Noah's arks with their stumpy funnels, high freeboard,

and flush, sloping decks, accompanied them. Last, headed by their commodore in a light cruiser, came the destroyers. They outnumbered the other craft by more than three to one, steaming at perfect intervals with their wakes stretched out astern of them, for all the world like grey beads strung at equal distances on a broad riband of white.

And side by side with the British battle-fleet went a squadron of gaily camouflaged battleships from across the Atlantic. They were conspicuous by reason of their lattice-work masts, and did not need to proclaim their nationality by the Stars and Stripes fluttering from their peaks. The Tricolor of France was also present in the pageant, while from the stumpy masts of two destroyers flew the blood-red Rising Sun flag of Japan.

The Grand Fleet was at sea, and the "mob," being part and parcel of it, though they seldom saw their big sisters, went with them.

Among the mighty collection of ships were vessels which had fought in the Heligoland Bight, at the Falklands, on the Dogger Bank, off the Dardanelles, and at Jutland. In the ships themselves were men from every English-speaking Dominion and Colony throughout the world, men who, besides the major actions, had fought on the bloodstained beaches of Gallipoli, at the reduction of the German Colonies in the Pacific, at Tsingtau, at Coronel, in South West and East Africa, in the Suez Canal and in Mesopotamia, in the immortal storming of the Zeebrugge mole and the blocking of the harbour, together with that at Ostende.

There were some serving in the Fleet who had spent many weary months patrolling the Dover Straits and had taken part in those close-range, bloodthirsty encounters in the dead of night with raiding enemy destroyers. Others, in destroyers and submarines, had been engaged in dodging in and out of the Heligoland Bight and Baltic, while still more had hunted German submarines, or had been engaged in the arduous work of patrolling or convoying troops from the uttermost parts of the earth. Still more had swept for mines, or had taken part in that interminable blockade which played so great a part in bringing the great fabric of the German Empire crashing to ruin. There were men present who could tell a tale of the Navy's every battle, its every adventure, its gallant failures, and its glorious triumphs, for the Grand Fleet, with the constant ebb and flow of its men, was representative not only of the nation but of the Empire.

And the united Empire, with its Allies, had foregathered on that memorable grey November morning to receive the surrender of the flower of the German Fleet.

Presently, through a smudge of smoke darkening the haze on the horizon to the eastward, there appeared the slender grey shape of a British light cruiser, trailing a bulbous kite balloon behind her. A few seconds' pause, and then, her grey sides blending into the sea mist, the ponderous bulk of the "Seydlitz" slid slowly into view.

Men in the British Fleet who had been waiting for that moment held their breath and

watched. Officers and men were at their stations, the guns were manned and ready, in case of possible treachery at the eleventh hour, but as ship after ship steamed slowly into view—the "Moltke," "Derfflinger," "Hindenburg," and "Von der Tann"—it was seen their guns were trained fore and aft.

They were travelling at little more than ten knots. Clouds of smoke, sure sign of bad stoking and inferior coal, poured from their funnels. The paint of their sides was dingy, and rust-streaked, not with the honest rime of the sea, but with the dirt and neglect of long periods of inactivity spent in harbour with the ships' companies in a state of virtual mutiny. And somehow those ships seemed typical of those who manned them; abject and forlorn, sullen, dispirited, and utterly beaten.

The hostile line was headed by the five battle cruisers, while astern of them came ten battleships with the "Kaiser" leading. Behind them again, though invisible in the haze, were seven light cruisers, led by a British vessel. Last, a cloud of forty-nine destroyers.

There was no triumphant cheering or shouts of victory. In dead silence, and with their men at action stations, the squadrons and flotillas of the Grand Fleet swept remorselessly on to carry out their appointed task. The heavy ships were steaming in two columns six miles apart and out of sight of each other in the greyness, and with the divisions in inverted sequence. Then, when the German line was sandwiched between them, the leading ship of each British division simultaneously swung

outwards through sixteen points of the compass, or 180 degrees. The vessels following turned after them, until at last the entire fleet was travelling on a parallel course to the enemy.

A light cruiser squadron led each line. Next a squadron of battle cruisers, and then the divisions of battleships, led respectively by the "Queen Elizabeth" and "Revenge." Astern of the battleships, again, were the double lines of light cruisers shepherding the enemy's lighter ships, while behind again came the German flotillas, hemmed in by a hollow square of British destroyers.

At 3.37 that afternoon, when the hostile squadrons had been escorted to their anchorages, and the bugles in the British ships were sounding the sunset call, the white, black-crossed ensign of Germany came fluttering down.

On board the British ships the same evening, when officers and men bowed their heads in thanksgiving, the words of the prayer which most of them had heard daily ever since they had entered the Service, took on a new significance.

" that we may be a safeguard unto our most gracious Sovereign Lord King George and his dominions, and a security for such as pass in the seas upon their lawful occasions. That the inhabitants of our islands may in peace and quietness serve Thee, our God, and that we may return in safety to enjoy the blessings of the land with the fruits of our labours, and with a thankful remembrance of Thy mercies to praise and glorify Thy Holy Name"

THE END.

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